“When in Rome ...” – Convergence Culture in Science Fiction Fandom

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“Hello. My name is Henry.

I am a fan.

Somewhere in the late 1980s, I got tired of people telling me to get a life.

I wrote a book instead.”

(Henry Jenkins 2006a, 1)

From Thomas More’s *Utopia* (first published in Latin in 1516) to contemporary Science Fiction (SF) and its many subgenres, from ‘First Fandom’ in the 1920s to today’s fan conventions with thousands of attendees, both SF and its fandom have undergone massive changes in the past decades. What all of the different forms of SF have in common is that all “result from negotiated exchanges between different segments of culture,” i.e. from a negotiation that aims at pinpointing one of several possible versions of the future as the most probable or desirable one (Attebery 2002, 170). In this negotiation process, the most prominent discussions revolve around questions of convergence, gender, and identity. The study of SF fans and fandom in general has also seen a number of paradigm shifts, ranging from the first ethnographic approaches in cultural studies to the current “aca-fan”-phenomenon (Jenkins 2013, viii).

Irrespective of whether one considers Mary Shelley, the first female SF author, or one of the women who contributed to early pulp SF fanzines,¹ like C.L. Moore, Leigh Brackett, Judith Merrill, and Andre Norton (to name but a few authors who sparked off the emergence of women writers in the 1950s), there have always been female authors in SF. While they were not particularly warmly welcomed by the predominantly male readership of SF before the 1960s (Staicar 1982, viii), these authors produced texts that later formed the cornerstone of feminist SF. Organized fandom of SF texts dates back to the 1920s, but enthusiastic readers² have always formed the primary audience of every SF author, male or female.

In this paper, I will sketch an outline of the development of feminist SF as a domain rich in cultural texts and will illustrate its influence on fan culture. Moreover, I will take a closer look at the convergence processes that play a vital role in feminist SF fandom. Tracing these developments, I will also discuss SF's often cumbersome interaction with academia in general and fan scholars in particular. In the course of this discussion, I will try to dispel some of the preconceived notions about SF and its fans by focussing on the heterogeneity of the various subcultures within SF fandom and their role in the media industry. Using Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), and Octavia Estelle Butler's *Dawn: Xenogenesis* (1987) as examples of feminist SF texts, I will show that fans of these novels create a participatory culture that produces new culturally significant texts. These new texts and the readers of both the new and the original texts are often empowered to facilitate social change, which is why my exploration will also consider the role feminist SF as a genre and media outlet may play in the convergence process.

Definitions

In his study *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins describes convergence as technological, industrial, and cultural change that can be traced in "the flow of content across multiple media platforms" and in "the migratory behavior of media audiences" who will follow that content (Jenkins 2006b, 2-3). The audience, here the fans of feminist SF, is "encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3). In the case of feminist SF, dispersed content can for instance be found in various online and offline sources, both fan-generated

¹ A SF fanzine is "[a]n amateur publication, produced by people interested in SF and Fantasy, distributed by mail or at conventions. The term is a combination of 'fan' and 'magazine'" (Rogow 1991, 112). For an in-depth description of fanzines, see Rogow (112-114). A complete historical overview of fanzine publishing can be found in Moskowitz (1954).

² In the context of this article, the term 'reader' is understood to mean "consumer of literary content" and will not refer to the fan-speak term 'reader/passifan,' which denotes someone who reads SF literature but does not engage in any fan activities (Rogow 1991, 243; 276). The term 'reader' is also used as a synonym for 'fan' and vice versa, unless otherwise specified.

and originating from within the mass media market. Borrowing French cyber-theorist Pierre Lévy's term ‘collective intelligence,’ Jenkins argues that convergence culture necessitates a collective consumption process which also entails communication about the consumed product: “convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow” (Jenkins 2006b, 3-4). This participatory nature of convergence in SF culture can best be seen at the conventions held on a regular basis, which serve a variety of purposes, such as providing a contact platform for authors and their readers, serving as a bridge for aspiring authors to transition from amateur to professional writer of SF, and lastly, providing an arena for fans to interact with the literary and media content available (Disch 1998, 140). Conventions are also public arenas where fans have the opportunity to discuss ideas and texts. Conventions are held in almost every major city in the US, and though some travelling may be involved, attending local or regional conventions usually does not require a major investment. Generally, buying a new or used copy of one's favourite book or borrowing it from the local library is all it takes to get involved in fandom. Engaging in discussions about the text online or at fan clubs is also an easily accessible way to participate in fannish activities.

According to the 2013 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘fan’ was first used in 1682 and denotes somebody who is “a keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement, and generally an enthusiast for a particular person or thing” (711). Since the 17th century, the word ‘fan’ has undergone a transformation with regard to its cultural meaning and individual connotation. To define the term precisely is therefore a worthwhile endeavour. As a working definition, Roberta Rogow's interpretation of SF fandom will serve adequately:

[T]he aggregate of SF fans [...] presumably includes anyone interested in reading, writing, producing, or watching Science Fiction. In actuality, SF fandom usually refers to those fans who actively take part in conventions, fan writing, or other fan-ac. It is a diverse group, often split on social and political issues, and a lot harder to stereotype than in past years. (1991, 109)

Generally speaking, fans fulfill a plethora of roles within the SF community. Elaborating on Schmidt-Lux, fans consume novels and gather information about the narratives, they accumulate collective and individual knowledge as well as fan objects, they travel to SF conventions, they produce criticism, fan fiction, fan art, etc., and they protest against discrimination or marginalization, against mass culture, consumerism, or dominant hegemonic structures (2010, 140). Fan culture as such is often understood as “a revitalization of the old folk culture process in response to the content of mass culture” (Jenkins 2006b, 21). According to the media industry and the logic of affective economics, the ideal fan as a consumer of cultural content “is active, emotionally engaged and socially networked” (20). This defini-

tion can also be used to describe fans of literature in the form of printed books, which continue to play a crucial role in the economics of SF culture despite the increasing availability of online and mass media content. At this point, however, an important distinction must be made between literary SF fandom and the media fandom surrounding film and television content. While both have their artistic and cultural values, the following discussion will focus mainly on the consumers of literary content, the so-called ‘book fans’ (Rogow 1991, 39). Based on personal correspondence with Ursula K. Le Guin, Attebery states that ‘SF’ traditionally stands for written Science Fiction, whereas the abbreviation ‘sci-fi’ “is what comes out of Hollywood: both the popular entertainments and the non-SF-reading public’s impression of what the field is all about” (Attebery 2002, 172). In the following discussion, the term ‘SF convention’ – often simply referred to as ‘con’ – will be understood as pertaining to fan cons, which are usually run by SF fans and which “tend to be Ser-Cons,³ that is, serious and constructive, with an emphasis on SF as literature as opposed to SF as entertainment” (Rogow 1991, 109). These cons are geared towards the authors, readers, and editors of literary SF in its many forms.

To find an accurate definition of ‘Science Fiction’ and its subgenres is a rather daunting task as the genre is in flux and has many subgenres, each with its own take on the general matter of the fantastic. In the context of Henry Jenkins’s convergence theory, however, one could define ‘SF’ as “not only a mode of storytelling but also a niche for writers, a marketing category for publishers, a collection of visual images and styles and a community of like-minded individuals” (Attebery 2003, 32).

Convergence No. 1: The Academic as Fan and the Fan as Critic

In order to bring about cultural convergence and the production of new cultural meaning, feminist SF – like any other SF subgenre – needs its fans, as these tend to be the most dedicated readers. But what makes a fan a good critic and eventually a producer of new cultural content? While the term ‘fan’ is used extensively in today’s popular culture, the study of ‘fandom’ and its cultural repercussions as well as the fans’ roles as cultural audiences are fairly recent research areas. Whereas the fans’ influence on their cultural surroundings is largely undisputed, the reluctance of academia to regard fans as major players in today’s cultural convergences may be due to negative stereotyping, as Lisa Lewis speculates:

³ ‘Ser-con’ refers to fans who are considered to be serious and constructive. For a broader discussion of the term, see Joseph L. Sanders, *Science Fiction Fandom* (1994).

For the academy, the answer may reside in its historical propensity to treat media audiences as passive and controlled, its tendency to privilege aesthetic superiority in programming, its reluctance to support consumerism, its belief in media industry manipulation. The popular press, as well, has stigmatized fandom by emphasizing danger, abnormality, and silliness. (1992, 1)

During the ongoing public debate on the value and aesthetics of cultural products, SF as a literary genre has largely remained at the margins of academic interest, although the fandom phenomenon had already been acknowledged as early as in 1954 with Moskowitz’s *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*. While many studies on fandom conducted since then usually included a section or two on SF fandom, the academic community as such has traditionally paid little attention to social criticism being voiced within the fandom culture of SF literature. Academic interest in SF, however, has always been present and in the early years of SF it came from within, not without the fan communities. It appeared in the form of fanzines⁴ that published letters sent by readers, of close readings of selected texts that were the subject of fan club meetings, or of letters to the authors written by excited fans who wanted to discuss and critique the literary and cultural content they had just consumed: “organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated” (Jenkins 2013, 86). External criticism, i.e. in-depth studies on SF texts and especially their readers, is significantly more recent. Academic interest in SF fandom emerged only in the 1990s with a number of publications on the subject (see Sanders 1994; Harris and Alexander 1998). At that point, SF as such and feminist SF in particular had long since become cultural ‘aca-fan’ testing grounds, discussing and exploring a plethora of questions and influencing the respective zeitgeist. According to Jenkins, an ‘aca-fan’ is a portmanteau to describe a hybrid scholarly identity and methodological approach adopted from cultural studies (Jenkins 2013, viii). Approaching fandom and the study of its texts from an aca-fan stance also entails an awareness of the inherent subjectivity of the position:

There are at least three things at stake in the use of the aca-fan concept: the acknowledgement of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study, the accountability of the ethnographer to the community we study, and the sense of membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of our research. (Jenkins 2013, xiii)

⁴ Fan fiction circulated in self-published newsletters or magazines. These were either written or edited by a single person or were ‘APA’ (Amateur Press Association) collaborative activities (Harris 1998, 8).

One does not have to be a scholar, though, if one wants to engage in criticism of SF content. As mentioned above, critical readings of SF texts date back to the 1920s and to the first fan cons in the first half of the 20th century. The first sizeable fan club was the Science Fiction League formed in 1934, which offered writers, publishers, and fans a platform to discuss ideas, voice criticism, share visions, and produce new content. Since many fans today also engage in literary criticism of the texts they read, two different kinds of critics have emerged: that of the academic as a critic and that of the fan as a critic. These two groups, however, are not mutually exclusive, as many scholars in the field of SF also identify themselves as SF fans to a certain degree. When reading the source texts and producing meaning, “fans bring to their work arrays of expertise beyond the usual mental equipment of literature professors” (Miesel 1994, 240). Yet SF representatives are not universally fond of scholars or non-fans as critics, a fact that makes access to fandom-based research rather cumbersome.⁵ However, as Russell Letson points out: “It is not the scholar as such who is the enemy [...]. Nor is it taboo to study or analyse SF [...]. No, it is the practice of academic literary research and publication carried out by those perceived as non-fans that provokes hostility” (1994, 230). Even criticism from within the genre, when voiced by writers who negate their origins in fandom, is perceived negatively: “writers such as Samuel R. Delany, Ursula Le Guin, and Joanna Russ, clinging to their intellectual credentials from academia, are often gracious to fans when they must interact with them, but they do not [...] recognize their origins in fandom” (Zimmer Bradley 1985, 69-70). This in-group versus out-group thinking pervades many aspects of fandom, as it serves to distinguish between the self-perception of the group’s identity and the non-fan ‘other,’ also called “the mundane” in SF fandom (Jenkins 1992, 213). Yet the SF community, with its astounding number of subcultures, can be extremely accommodating to its fans.⁶ Entering into fandom and engaging in fannish activities therefore has an impact not only on the group but also on the individual fan and on the authors catering to this particular kind of audience.

Generally speaking, academic interest and the approaches to fandom studies can be traced to three distinct phases. Whereas the first phase was a rather detached ethnographic approach often undertaken either by non-fans or by closeted fans who did not reveal their fannish sensibilities out of fear of losing their academic credibility, the second phase (starting in the 1990s) saw more and more academics approach the field as self-proclaimed fans. The first phase saw an array of attempts to define and study fandom from the standpoint of social sciences and their “active audience approach” (Winter 2010, 164). Tulloch and Jenkins (1995),

⁵ An in-depth discussion of the anti-academic sentiment in SF and the debate surrounding the issue would merit a study of its own. For an extensive overview of relevant literature on the subject, see Letson (1994, 234).

⁶ It should be noted here that not all subcultures and/or subgroups within SF fandom are equally accepting of each other.

Tulloch (1999), and Bacon-Smith (2000) belong to the second phase of researchers who tried to incorporate their own experiences as fans into their academic work in the field of fandom studies. The current third phase of fandom studies (see Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007 and Jenkins 2006a) is characterized by approaches in which the author not only takes the fan’s perspective into account but also writes from a fan’s point of view and is accepted by the SF community in that dual role (Winter 2010, 168).⁷ Some novels, such as Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Star-Anchored, Star-Angered* (1979), deliberately poke fun at academia, its institutions in general, and universities in particular with acidulous satire (Chapman 1982, 99). Other authors approach the rift between academia and SF with more subtlety, but true convergences between academia and SF remain the exception to the rule. It is slightly paradoxical that Elgin’s departure from academic life, which coincided with her brief straying from SF and her venture into the fantasy genre with the publication of *The Ozark Trilogy* (1981), actually predates the publication of her most acclaimed and most science-based SF series, the *Native Tongue* trilogy (first published between 1984 and 1993). One might argue that this reflects on Elgin’s stance on the perceived incompatibility of academia and SF authorship, but then again many authors of hard SF have a background in science and academia. Similar to other authors such as Le Guin, Elgin also published SF criticism, although most of it was written after she had left her tenured position at the State University of San Diego, again as though being an active academic would preclude one’s ability or right also to publish SF criticism. Although Le Guin’s novels, for instance, have garnered critical acclaim outside of SF fandom as well, feminist SF texts and their criticism are oftentimes still marginalized or trivialized, discredited by what SF fans perceive as the cultural elite of the mundane outside world. Rosi Braidotti, however, sees this disregard as one of the strong suits of feminist SF:

As a “low culture” genre, moreover, it is also mercifully free of grandiose pretensions – of the aesthetic or cognitive kind – and thus ends up providing a more accurate and honest depiction of contemporary culture than other, more self-consciously representative genres [...]. (qtd. in Barr 2003, 150)

It is exactly this kind of honesty that makes the social criticism inherent in feminist SF viable and believable for its readers. Jenkins adds that “fandom is a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups [...] to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; [it is] a way of appropriating [...] texts and re-reading them in a fashion that serves different interests” (Jenkins 1991, 174). Embracing the text, constructing new meaning via its interpretation, and communicating about its messages, fans are in many ways the executive and contemplative

⁷ Jenkins argues that Fiske’s ‘autoethnography’ (a term coined in 1990) could strike a balance between the necessary academic detachment and the fannish involvement that many researchers have to reconcile (see Roose, Schäfer, and Schmidt-Lux 2010).

branch of literature, as they not only consume cultural products such as novels, but also create new material (Attebery 2002, 63). Chris Atton emphasizes the power of fan critics even further: “in effect, fans come to perform their own detailed critiques of their chosen subjects. Such displays of specialized knowledge are common [...] and conspicuously set them apart from the bulk of mainstream criticism” (Atton 2004, 140). This mirrors what Jenkins calls “collective intelligence” (Jenkins 2006b; 2013) gathered in groups and used to produce new interpretations of existing texts or to converge different ideas into new paradigms. While this phenomenon is not limited to SF, both the genre as such and its fandom seem to be perfect venues for the participatory culture that is necessary to create change.

Fandom constitutes a space defined by its refusal of mundane values and practices, its celebration of deeply held emotions and passionately embraced pleasures. Fandom’s very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture. Yet fandom also provides a space in which fans may articulate their specific concerns about sexuality, gender, racism, colonialism, militarism, and forced conformity (Jenkins 2013, 283). This means that fans hold the power to dissent, to change and create, and to address issues they hold dear. Most fans, especially female ones, will always opt for these strategies, as the following section will show.

Convergence No. 2: Fandom and Power – Beware of those Women!

In order to understand the position of early SF fans and the role of women within SF fandom, a look at the origins of organized fandom is helpful:

Science fiction began as a subset of and reinforcement for the mainstream patriarchal culture of technological heroism during the 1930s, when the Great Depression had taken from most men their primary source of patriarchal power: their ability to create wealth. (Bacon-Smith 2000, 96)

Thus deprived of fixed and defining social structures, men (and women) who turned to science fiction in the 1920s and 1930s found not only hope for a better future through technology, but they also “found in the world of pulp publishing a future that had the potential to return to them status and financial security that the Great Depression had shattered for most of the middle class” (Bacon-Smith, 96). While strong male characters were numerous, female protagonists or even antagonists were entirely absent from or poorly portrayed in the works of male and early female authors of the time. Mary Brizzi argues that it was only when SF authors and the genre as such began to acknowledge the fact that women also read SF and that one of the strongest appeals of the genre was the reader’s identification with the main characters that writers began to use effective heroines as protagonists (1982, 32).

Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) was published in an era in which second-wave feminism was the determining paradigm for female SF authors. Le Guin’s thought experiment presents a far-distant future and society in which individuals are biologically androgynous for most of their life and can choose their gender and sex during specific periods of time. This reflects the social and cultural discourse on gender stability and dualism in identity formation which also played an important role in academia at the time. Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984) was published fifteen years later and focusses on the power of language in the struggle for gender equality in a fictional society in which women are once again little more than chattel. Finally, Butler’s *Dawn* (1987) depicts issues that second-wave feminists and post-feminists have continued to argue about to this day: the rights of women concerning their bodies and their reproductive rights. Yet Butler was also the first female African American author to achieve wide-spread commercial success and critical acclaim. Early SF fandom had not only been predominantly male, but it had also been almost exclusively white (Moskowitz 1974, 10). While authors such as Samuel Delaney, early SF’s most successful African American author, made SF attractive for fans of colour, Butler succeeded in including women of colour as well.

Although these three novels discuss different memes and themes, they all aim at influencing the cultural and social discourse concerning the questions they raise: questions about gender, social participation, sexual identity, and many other aspects. Yet in order for these questions to be further discussed, a forum was needed and quickly found: SF conventions. The general willingness of SF fans to congregate and discuss the above-mentioned questions, either in the virtual world via message boards or in real life at the various fan cons, stems from the inherent millenarianist nature of the genre, as “[a]ll through the twentieth century, it had its eye fixed on 2001 and beyond” (Disch 1998, 144). It seems only natural that the readers of SF wished to interact with that future, to influence, and to shape it. Disch goes even further in explaining the appeal of SF as an outlet for fannish fantasies and real-life involvement: “SF is visionary, a map of the future by means of which fans have a private view of the millennium – which fans shall inherit” (140).

With its perception of readers as an audience willing to participate in the above-mentioned discourse,⁸ fandom can be seen as empowering, emancipating the individual from mere consumerism, and enabling the fan to deduce new meaning from the consumed text. This effect is facilitated especially through interaction with other media or other fans, as Jenkins observes: “[f]reedom is fostered when

⁸ The term ‘reader’ suggests homogeneity where there is none. Already in 1985, Carter Scholz argued that SF’s readership consisted of only a small core audience, while the rest of the readers fluctuated in and out of the genre, leading to a turnover every four to five years (59). This holds true for writers as well as their readers, as most writers also fluctuate in and out of what Scholz describes as the ‘ghetto’ of SF publishing.

the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available” (2006b, 11). By extrapolating and producing new meaning and ultimately also new content (e.g. in the form of fan art or fan fiction) “fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate” (Jenkins 1992, 208). According to Jenkins, the product in question does not necessarily have to be a material artefact but can also consist of the interpretive activity in which the reader engages. Thus the focus shifts from the media content as such to the reader’s use of the consumed material (209). This conceptual interpretation of fannish activity and the roles of fans in their respective multimedia surroundings is based primarily on Bourdieu’s⁹ and de Certeau’s examinations of the relationship between classes in a class system, as Cheryl Harris observes:

In postindustrialist societies becoming more, not less, class divided, one’s subordination may be a source of anomie and despair. Looked at this way, some individuals may seek to express their otherwise silenced identities through a common interest in a symbol, icon or text, and, then, redress their alienation through the social nature of fan practice. (1998, 5)

The readers of Le Guin, Elgin, and Butler often also have recourse to mass media such as the internet or even television and produce content for the mass market. Many SF fans have early on embraced new content and new media formats or platforms and, in the interaction with other fans, have used new developments in delivery technologies creatively and for their own purposes. Again, the participatory element in fan culture is indispensable for the creation of collective intelligence that informs so much of feminist SF fandom. The participation gap, which especially affects older or less tech-savvy fans, has had less of a negative effect on SF fandom than may be assumed. While new modes and methods of content delivery have continued to emerge, VHS tapes and the like never went out of fashion in wide areas of SF fandom. Moreover, conventions have played a vital role in closing the participation gap, as they provide even fans without internet access or TV sets with the opportunity to view their favourite films or shows.¹⁰ Instead of trying to understand the changes of the past decades by applying the digital revolution paradigm, tracing the convergence processes at play provides a much more plausible explanation of SF fandom’s unfettered participation in many new trends. James Tiptree Jr. (aka Alice Hastings Sheldon), for instance, claims that isolation and limited social interaction are generally detrimental to a person’s psyche, sense of self, and personal fulfillment, which is also one of the main themes of her novels (Frisch 1982, 49). By isolation Tiptree does not only mean social reclusiveness

⁹ However, Bourdieu’s studies on cultural capital, which in SF fandom mostly translates into the investment in collector’s items and other paraphernalia, are not the subject of this paper.

¹⁰ Visitors who only attend cons for the purpose of watching films or TV shows are called ‘mushrooms.’ They find a variety of venues open to them, such as several film rooms and specialized panels with screenings of films or shows followed by discussions (Rogow 1991, 217).

but also an unwillingness to embrace more than one possible approach to structuring one’s identity around gendered norms, which limits the individual to one and only one mode of expression: male or female. This, in turn, limits the individual’s opportunities of gaining interpersonal experiences. While the individual fan is still largely defined in terms of gender and identity by the texts around which his or her activities are centred, it is the convergence process from reader over fan to producer of new cultural content that is so typical of feminist SF fandom.¹¹

Fannish activities include a variety of different ways of expressing one’s opinion and getting into contact with each other. Of course, SF is the genre of new ideas and scientific speculation. Yet when one looks at the various prizes awarded by the SF community, both those voted on by the fans (e.g. the Hugo Award) and those extended by the writers themselves (e.g. the Nebula Award), it becomes obvious that these accolades entail a certain conservatism when it comes to fiction written by women. Although Butler and Le Guin have both received some of these awards, the fans of feminist SF early on organized a special convention focussed on feminist literary SF. WisCon, which was first held in 1977, welcomes fans, writers, editors, publishers, scholars, and artists from around the world to discuss science fiction and fantasy and it places its emphasis on issues of feminism, gender, race, and class.¹² The interactions of fans and their discussions have also led to several interesting cultural convergences. The feminist SF texts inspired the fans not only to establish the James Tiptree Jr. Award (initiated in 1991 by SF authors Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler for SF that challenges preconceived notions of gender),¹³ but also to set up the Carl Brandon Society (founded in 1997 to foster dialogue about issues of race, ethnicity, and culture).¹⁴ In 2005, the Carl Brandon Society, in turn, began awarding SF authors of colour, who centred their narratives on issues of ethnicity and race, with the Parallax Award. Also in 2005, the Society began awarding deserving SF authors of any ethnicity with the Kindred Award to honour their engagement with questions of ethnicity. WisCon has thus instigated the diversification of the available awards and leveled out the playing field for many authors who until recently were often marginalized within the SF community. Writing against the grain is now not only acceptable but also desirable. WisCon has proven to be what James Gee calls an “affinity space,” which is an environment that allows people of different backgrounds to socialize, to engage in informal learning, and to share knowledge and expertise based on the voluntary affiliation with an issue, a group, or a text (qtd. in Jenkins 2006b, 280).

¹¹ Labelling the many subgroups of SF literary fandom simply as ‘fans’ does not reflect the heterogeneity of fandom culture, nor does it adequately describe the many different and sometimes conflicting views on any given text, which exist even within individual subgroups. For an in-depth analysis of different fan groups, see Joseph L. Sanders’s *Science Fiction Fandom* (1994) or Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Science Fiction Culture* (2000).

¹² For more information on WisCon, see <http://www.wiscon.info/>.

¹³ For more information on the James Tiptree Jr. Award, see <http://tiptree.org/>.

¹⁴ For more information on the Carl Brandon Society, see <http://www.carlbrandon.org/>.

To those who examine the narrative themes of the above-mentioned novels, it becomes clear that feminist SF writers often construct heroines and heroes who undermine established and widely accepted categories of 'self' and 'other.' During the 1960s, when women writers entered the SF scene,¹⁵ women found that while they constituted the Other in society (a concept shaped by Simone de Beauvoir as early as in 1949), SF fandom embraced them and their ideas, albeit reluctantly at first. This may have been due to the fact that the emergence of female writers in SF coincided with a general gender shift in SF fandom, as more and more women became fans in their own right and not just because their male relatives and friends were involved in fandom. Women also became interested in SF for different reasons than men who originally sought to attain new meaning for their contested egos in turning to SF fandom of the early 1930s. By the 1970s, the gender ratio in SF fandom had almost equalled out and polls taken at SF conventions showed that different subgroups for women had emerged in SF (Coulson 1994, 7). This influx of women into the SF scene also changed practices of publishing, which, just like SF fandom, had previously been almost exclusively male-dominated (Coulson 7). This, in turn, opened the stage for writers like Le Guin and made their ideas available to an audience that would approach their texts without recriminations, while at the same time remaining critical of the texts and their messages (Bester 1964, 34). With female authors being no longer restricted to publishing in SF magazines or fanzines, more and more full-length novels written by women started to arrive on the market, often penned by those who had started out as readers and fans before publishing short fiction in the professional and amateur presses of their day. These emerging authors often focussed on issues that were not limited to technology, science, or other hard science fiction staples. Women writers of the day instead focussed on social injustice, poverty, racial tensions, or other current societal problems. Following a long theatrical tradition in which delicate subjects are presented to the public in a literally playful way, these relatively new authors quickly became the voice of the underprivileged in SF: "like cultural negotiations on the Elizabethan stage, SF's distinctive forms of play exploit the tremendous social energy within troubling concepts" (Attebery 2002, 189).

Just as traditional SF had provided a gateway for readers to explore fantastic new worlds and technologies, the newly emerged feminist SF of the 1960s and 1970s offered new ideas on the dominant cultural and social discourses of the time. Apart from authors such as Frederick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth who were also writing SF as social criticism, it was feminist SF and its writers that exhibited the greatest potential for social change: "despite the lingering presence of patriarchal privilege and power – the most effective political engagement in the SF

¹⁵ Of course, there were female authors of SF before the 1960s but their contributions were neither as commercially successful nor as influential for the genre as a whole.

world at this time came from feminist creative and critical work, as feminist SF in general and the critical utopias in particular demonstrate" (Moylan 2000, 36).

Le Guin's protagonist is a man, but both the auto-image and the hetero-image of his masculinity are under duress, as he is a visitor on a planet whose inhabitants are androgynous and only exhibit a gendered, sexual self during a brief period of their monthly estrous cycle. And even then, they can almost freely choose whether they want to spend the sexual period as a male or a female. This idea of self-determination and fluid gender definitions resonated strongly with the female audiences of the time and mirrored the social discourse of equal opportunity, which also formed the basis for many other novels written by female authors during the second wave of feminism in the US. Following along these lines, Le Guin's novel examines ideas about what a society could look like in which gender no longer plays an important role. With its genderless inhabitants, the fictional world she creates invites readers to question their own definition of self and identity, as "science fiction is indeed all about displacements, ruptures, and discontinuities" (Barr 2003, 150). Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* is often compared to Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as both depict a feminist dystopia. While Atwood's text focusses on the sometimes violent struggle for female self-determination and reproductive rights (much like Butler's *Dawn*), Elgin's female protagonists fight for gender equality in a non-violent way by creating a women's language designed to provide women with the ultimate tool of expressing themselves. The concept of a women's language in *Native Tongue* reflects the discourse on man-made language (see Spender 1980), which dominated linguistics in the US in the 1980s. Set in a fictional near-future US society, the narrative recounts the many ways in which the female protagonists use language for empowerment and subversion of the dominant misogyny and heterosexism. *Native Tongue* never became a bestseller, which may at least to a certain degree be due to the above-mentioned friction between SF fandom and academia, since Elgin (a trained linguist) wrote the novel with the express purpose of purporting her ideas about feminist language use. This focus on 'hard,' i.e. tangible science as the basis for a feminist SF narrative can also be found in Butler's *Dawn*. Through Lilith's eyes, the reader is confronted with the ethical, political, and cultural implications of genetic engineering, a field that was highly contested during the time of the novel's publication.

All three authors visited conventions regularly, made themselves available to their fans, and interacted with the audiences they were trying to reach. Whereas Butler and Le Guin were once invited to WisCon as Guests of Honour (Butler in 1980 and Le Guin in 1996), Elgin was even invited twice (in 1982 and 1986). All three have also embraced convergence in their own ways. Elgin, for instance, released self-recorded cassette tapes to enable fans to learn Láadan, the language she had constructed for the *Native Tongue* trilogy. She even published a teaching grammar as a non-fictional supplement to her SF thought experiment. VHS tapes with recorded interviews about the theoretical background of the novels and the linguis-

tic aspects on which they were centred were also made available. Many of Le Guin's novels have been adapted to the screen, thus making them more readily available, even to audiences outside of SF literary fandom. Such adaptations are not always welcomed, as some members of the SF community think that books are the only true story-telling format. Yet many also believe that in order to reach a wider audience for the sometimes subversive ideas of feminist SF, mass media are a *sine qua non*: "SF gives up control over its inventions; in return it gets to see them circulated beyond the confines of the relatively tiny community of serious readers" (Attebery 2002, 172). Some authors, like Le Guin, whose audience had not been small to begin with, had less trouble with the idea of TV adaptations. Others, like Octavia Butler, were more reserved. Butler can be described as having been a rather private person who only engaged in limited interactions with her fans. Her novels, however, were among the first to be adapted as audiobooks for blind audiences and they are still available today as cassettes, CDs, or mp3-downloads on platforms such as "audible.com." Yet Jenkins aptly points out that "[d]elivery systems are simply and only technologies; media are also cultural systems [...] [which] persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum" (Jenkins 2012, 467). Apart from these adaptations of the authors' original works, fan-written fiction, fan art, and new forms of mediazines all deal with the different themes in the three novels and beyond, thus creating and distributing new ideas within feminist SF fandom.

Convergence No. 3: Fans as Authors, Authors as Fans

Having looked at the readers' and fans' perspectives, I will now focus on the authors. In his 1985 essay "Inside the Ghetto and Out," Carter Scholz describes the world of SF publishing as a ghetto with self-enforcing standards of writing style and content that authors are wise to abide by, "as writers cease to write the immediately unsalable" (61). While Suzette Haden Elgin has never denied having initially entered SF writing for commercial reasons, authors like Le Guin and Butler decided on SF as a vehicle for their ideas for artistic reasons. In the most effective, i.e. the most thought-provoking SF, the 'novum' tends to play an important role, both in professional and fan fiction. In order to understand what makes a good author of effective feminist SF, a closer look at this novum is warranted:

In the most effective SF, the disorienting element that Darko Suvin calls a novum, which can be anything from a new invention to an alien invasion, corresponds to something already inherent in these characters [...]. In confronting the novum, characters are forced to rewrite their own stories, [...] – the masterplots – within which they make sense of their lives. The SF writer, then, is not simply a popularizer of scientific ideas, but someone who links those ideas to cultural narratives. (Attebery 2002, 174)

This re-writing of personal and fictional narratives occurs in two major ways in feminist SF fandom. On the one hand, there are the novels with their strong protagonists who challenge the discourse of their time and place and reinvent themselves in the process. After having given up on his male ego, Le Guin's Genly Ai contends towards the end of the narrative that gender is fluid and unimportant to the definition of 'self' and instead puts friendship above all else. Butler's Lilith not only spawns a whole new generation of human-alien hybrids to populate a new version of Earth, but she also converts violent dissent into politically efficient resistance. She eventually saves humanity by first reluctantly and then enthusiastically embracing her role as mother and political leader. Elgin's Nazareth, a shy linguist and proficient conference interpreter and translator, grows up in a world in which women are subjugated and denigrated to little more than property. Through her personal trials and tribulations she not only finds her inner strength and assertiveness but also helps free the women of Earth peacefully and without violence by introducing the women's language Láadan, which she had helped to create.

On the other hand, there is the fan fiction that takes the available narratives and changes them in significant ways, either correcting perceived defects in the story-telling or reinventing and augmenting the narrative to showcase the individual fan's preferences. One could argue that every kind of literary genre is only as viable as its readership. SF, a genre that often eludes concise definitions of its boundaries and rules, seems more and more entrenched when it comes to its sub-genres. An exploration of the genre's development from the early years through the Sputnik and post-space-race era reveals that SF literature and the aspirations of its writers, maybe more so than in any other genre, are tied to the state of the market. When the interest in science and space peaked in the US during the well-publicized space race (1955-1972), so did interest in SF. When the market contracted again, many SF readers turned to other genres and sales plummeted. Today's scientific advances are more earth-bound and lie in the fields of nanotechnology, computing, and bionics but they somehow seem to generate a more stable influx of new ideas into SF (especially in hard SF) and attract a more loyal readership. This may in part be due to the development of education in many countries, as more and more SF readers now understand a great deal more about the underlying scientific details and are thus more critical and attentive readers and fans. For authors and fans alike, these cultural paradigm shifts and the economics of publishing are forces to be reckoned with.

The expansion of the market and the genre over the years has had strong side-effects on authors and audiences alike. As Marion Zimmer Bradley observes, “[f]ewer and fewer fans aspire to become professionals [...] – or if they do, it is harder to get in touch with their fellows. Partly this is a matter of sheer size” (1985, 70). Participatory culture in SF fandom traditionally inspired young writers who, in turn, sold their ideas to their fellow enthusiasts. For women in particular, fan writing was an instrument of self-expression, of dissent, and of empowerment. With an ever-expanding genre that displayed an ever more unclear definition, the above-

mentioned intrinsic restrictions further encumbered fledgling artists in their production of new material. Yet once again, conventions remained the safe havens for many literary SF fans.

Gaining access to the creator of the material one's fandom centres on is another factor in participatory fan culture. In the early days of SF fandom, a limited number of popular and well-known writers faced a fan crowd of no more than several hundred admirers of their craft. When one looks at modern SF conventions, it becomes clear that these numbers have changed. Lines of over a thousand people waiting to get an author's or an actor's autograph are regular phenomena and authors and actors alike have resorted to hiring bodyguards to ward off overly enthusiastic fans. Due to the limited access to the creators of the original SF texts, the majority of fans have recourse to the texts as such. One of the effects of the ever more elusive author-fan relationships has been the emergence of more secondary literature on various issues taken from popular texts or on individual authors. Even before academia began to take an interest in SF fandom in the 1990s, fans in the 1970s already wrote about the discourse in the community and about the authors (Arbur 1982, 1). This is particularly true of feminist SF fans, as fan writing in the feminist SF circles focussed on subversion, otherness, and alienation with regard to the pervasive gender discussions of the time. Rainer Winter explains that through their 'divergent' and 'confrontational' readings and reworkings of SF texts, productive and creative fans undermine dominant paradigms and any hegemonic order (2010, 177). Harlan Ellison (like Carter Scholz) contends that fan culture focussing on an author's text, however, tends to stereotype the writer, as fans usually expect only more of the same, while being highly adverse to any changes made to the source material (Weil and Wolfe 2002, 63-64). Marion Zimmer Bradley, for instance, admits to having been pressured into writing sequels she originally had not planned (1985, 76).

While both writers and fans seem to be lamenting the divide between them, many seem to overlook the many convergences and synergies between the professional and the amateur (i.e. fannish) production of SF material. When being asked which use they see in fandom apart from the most obvious one of the sales of their books, many authors will say that they welcome young followers who start out as fans and eventually become professional writers who thus provide SF with a fresh new perspective (Zimmer Bradley 1985, 77). Beside the tensions in this sometimes troubled relationship between the factions, cross-fertilization between authors and fans writing for fan audiences is considerable and it can be argued that fans may influence authors in many ways. Whether fans demand more of the same or rather different content or style, some authors acknowledge that fan feedback has led them "to go into new areas which have been previously unexplored" (77). SF authors use their own cultural surroundings to create their fiction by either reacting to or interacting with that culture. World events shape these surroundings in many meaningful ways and many seminal works of SF were written as a direct response to world events (Moskowitz 1974, 252), such as the war in Vietnam. During that

particular time, interest in SF grew because more and more readers were looking for an escapist way to reimagine the future. Demand for high-quality SF increased, the market expanded, and the first courses on SF were offered at renowned universities (Scholz 1985, 61).

Authors also influence each other and react to each other’s fictionalized stand-points, which can be seen as early as in female SF of the 1960s. Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Coyote Jones* series (published between 1970 and 1986) with its wannabe macho protagonist, for instance, can arguably be seen as a reply to “the juvenile sexist science fiction (or fantasy) of writers like John Norman, with his Gor series” (Chapman 1982, 97). Chapman goes on to argue that in response to the largely dysfunctional female heroines and patriarchal male protagonists of her time, Elgin’s *Coyote Jones* “belongs to a certain breed of intelligent men who have trouble feeling desire for a woman unless she displays marked intelligence and a challenging personality” (97), which sets him apart from what was perceived as the norm for both female and male subjectivity in society and fiction alike. Author-to-author influences are not always this overtly stated and are sometimes only perceivable when the reader is familiar with the social and cultural discourse in question.

Conclusion

All types of convergences to be found in SF fandom today impact the way readers consume media and literary contents available to them. While technophiles may blog about their views while sitting in a panel at a SF convention, others may adapt available content to new formats and delivery modes, such as creating filk music to honour or satirize their favourite book, show, or film. Audiences listening to the filkers may then be inspired to consume the original. New discussions may be started with the material created by new authors and fans, thus producing new canons and new ways of defining our understanding of what humanity’s future might look like. This cultural background is also passed on to the children of fans who grow up in fan culture: “Second-generation fans are often encouraged to read and write as soon as possible. Any sign of artistic or scientific talent is fostered by their eager parents” (Rogow 1991, 302).

So the spirit of convergence culture lives on. Convergence is a process, not an endpoint (Jenkins 2006b, 16), which also means that, in a genre in which trans-media storytelling is the key to world-making, a plethora of new and hitherto unexplored avenues await the willing participant. Ultimately, convergence culture in SF and feminist SF fandom will further enhance our openness towards new (and potentially better) ways of understanding “how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world” (Jenkins 2006b, 23). This, in turn, will continue to allow generations of fans to live in a world they can change, in which definitions of ‘self’ are in flux, and in which fans dare to be fans, continually evaluating their own position within feminist SF fandom and the

wider SF community: “it can promote an acceptance of the fragility and inadequacy of our own claims to be able to ‘explain’ and ‘justify’ our own most intensely private or personal moments of fandom and media consumption” (Hills 2002, 72). This justification requires a voice, which in turn requires the power to use that voice. Feminist SF fans have made boundaries visible by transgressing them: “Norms that are exceeded lose their invisibility, lose their status as common sense and are brought out into the open agenda” (Fiske 1989, 114). This process has created a platform for discussion of numerous different social and political issues. Jenkins observes that “the political effects of these fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas [...] but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture)” (Jenkins 2006b, 246). Yet there is still a long way to go, as Jenkins concludes:

Nobody regards these fan activities as a magical cure for the social ills of postindustrial capitalism. They are no substitute for meaningful change, but they can be used effectively to build popular support for such change, to challenge the power of the culture industry to construct the common sense of mass society, and to restore a much-needed excitement to the struggle against subordination. (1991, 198)

Fans always have the ‘exit’ or ‘voice’ option (Roose and Schäfer 2010, 372-374), i.e. they can choose to leave fandom and remain entirely passive or to voice their dissent and also their approval with regard to certain trends. They can either engage in changing the status quo or augment trends they wish to see gain more traction. Given the chance, feminist SF fans will always choose to let themselves be heard loudly and clearly.

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