FIAWOL: The Making of Fannish Feminisms

As we work in the present...we must have the hope of a better future to sustain us. Women’s studies conferences, SF conventions, smaller group interactions, women's and SF small press publishing, these are our praxis as well as the place where we can develop our theory, and from our theory, our future.

→ Janice Bogstad (1981: 2)

Coterminous with the development and establishment of academic sf criticism, similar struggles over the meaning of feminism and women's fiction in sf occurred in the informal spaces of sf magazines, fanzines, and conventions. In the formative years of the early 70s, these dialogues often featured many of the same voices, since author/critics, like Russ in particular, participated in fan debates. As the epigraph from Bogstad suggests, in these conversations the “feminist question in sf” was perhaps even more loaded, because these interactions were figured directly as feminist praxis and intervention. Clashes around the meanings of feminism, the sexual politics of fandom, or even the key texts for consciousness-raising were, as the slogan ran, intensely personal as well as political. Unlike the more formalized spaces of academic debate, the feminists involved in fandom were frequently called on to explain or justify “feminism 101” to men and women they were in direct contact with—often face to face. Despite the creation of feminist-friendly spaces in fanzines and conventions, to retain one's cultural connections to fandom, it was presumably necessary (no matter how difficult) to sometimes just walk away from or ignore anti-feminist sentiment.

Encounters and tensions with earlier generations of female fans could also be difficult, especially if these women perceived feminism as an attack on their accomplishments as writers or fans in the days when women's presence was less obtrusive. Thus in thinking about the constitution of sf feminisms in fandom, recognizing the persistence of counter-narratives is crucial, even more so than in academic

1 FIAWOL is a famous fannish acronym for “Fandom is a way of life.”
feminist criticism, since such narratives reveal the very personal politicized debates conducted around feminist issues and the way SF acted as a frame for feminist praxis and cultural activity. This is particularly evident in engagements with non-feminist women or those who preferred to think of themselves as humanist or equi-sexist. Such tensions and conflicts reveal very clearly the terms of these debates and what was at stake in claiming a feminist space in SF and fandom. In drawing together evidence of such points of tension, an interesting figure emerged as a focal point—one who might seem out of place in a narrative about feminist fandom—author Marion Zimmer Bradley.

Bradley holds an ambiguous place in feminist SF criticism; recognized as an influential early female writer, her resistance to “mainstream” feminism and her very popularity has meant that she remains a fairly marginal figure in critical studies. However, from a lesbian and queer perspective, her fiction offers some early examples of challenges to heterosexuality. Bradley was at the center of a number of often heated debates about feminism, women’s writing, and the history of women in SF. Thus in addition to framing the emergence of feminist fandom and tracing some of its key directions, publications, and political effects, this chapter also examines some of the exchanges involving Bradley as a case study of the complex stories and counter-narratives circulating around feminism in 1970s fandom.

Becoming human

The 1960s is most commonly identified as a transitional period for women’s involvement in fandom. Although greater numbers of women were entering fandom and becoming more visible, they still remained in the minority. Consequently, the stereotype (and atmosphere) of fandom continued to be masculinist, despite social rights movements and the increase in women’s participation. The existence of femme-fan groups in the ’50s did not appear to have any direct effects on women’s entry into fandom in the ’60s, beyond the influence of certain key individuals. The earlier cooperative efforts to construct a women’s space in fandom seem to have left little impression a decade later. In a number of retrospectives on her experiences in fandom in the late ’60s, for example, Susan Wood does not refer to any of the pioneering women editing fanzines in previous decades. The only reference to earlier femme-fans is a negative one: “Women’s organizations in the ’50s in fandom withered” (Wood 1978: 5). Wood’s recollections of the fannish environment in the late-1960s are worth quoting at length.

The stereotyped fan, in my generation, was still the bespectacled young, white, middleclass male, highly intellectual and socially inept. Some notable women, “femme” fans (as distinct from real fans?) (boyfen anyone?), published, wrote, ran conventions: Lee Hoffman had gafiated, but Bjo Trimble was involved with artshows and the ST Concordance, Juanita Coulson and Elinor Busby were co-editing notable fanzines, as was Joyce Katz, then Fisher, whose woman-produced What About Us Grils? directly inspired my own first fanzine, several years later. Still, women were accepted mostly as appendages to notable fans, or as Token Men, at least until the WPSFA Phenomenon, which was, as Joe Siclari notes, “the largest invasion of single females ever to hit fandom til [sic] the Star Trek Eruption.” (Wood 1977: 44; see also Wood 1978)

Anecdotes from other sources reinforce Wood’s view that in the ’60s female fans were often considered little more than “appendages.” A 1968 article by Robin White asks “Are Femme-Fans Human?” In the view of most male fans, she concludes, this depends largely on whether or not they are married. Before Robin White became involved with BNF Ted White, she reported being “chased” by “the guys,” and regarded as a “sexy object”; after she “went out” with Ted, however, “[i]t was as if I had suddenly been born a real human being before their very eyes… I was no longer up for grabs. Once I was no longer a possible potential girlfriend, I was treated more like a common garden variety human-type person” (White 1968: 52).

2 The WPSFA (Western Pennsylvania SF association) was a group formed by a number of female fans: “founding mothers” Linda Busheyager, "Ginjier" Buchanan, and "Suzle" (Suzanne) Tompkins in 1967. The term "gafiated" is a form of the fannish acronym GAFIA, “getting away from it all” which signals a temporary or more lasting stepping back from active fandom.

3 A similar anecdote was related by Jerry Kaufman to the timebinders electronic list: “At some con in the very late ’60s, I met a young woman while wandering the hotel halls, and we decided to visit some room parties together. We walked into the first one, and a mass of men looked our way. With one voice, they roared, ’A GIRL!‘ and surged toward my companion. She turned and fled, and I never saw her again.” Kaufman, timebinders list, 21/10/97, http://lists.flovers.org/mailman/listinfo/timebinders.
Wood also wrote revealingly of the ambivalent status of the '60s female fan in her 1978 article “The People's Programming” (Wood 1978). In her early impressions, fandom was a welcoming space where fans would talk seriously to her, where people did not “play silly sex-role games, those games in which I was a misfit 'girl' in the 'real' mundane world. They accepted me as one of themselves” (4). In retrospect, Wood qualified the terms of her reception: “They accepted me as an Honorary Man” (4). Like Robin White, Wood perceived a significant change in her status after marrying a fan; but (writing from a '70s perspective) her analysis is expressed in explicitly feminist terms. Wood’s experience of fandom was colored by the fact that she soon “became Partnered and then Married: as a woman (= 'sexual being') I was neutralized, safe. I could talk to men, without them, or their partners, feeling I was a Threat” (4).

In Wood’s narrative, her gradual transition from “Honorary Man to Woman Fan” is accompanied by a change in fannish attitude from acceptance to incomprehension (and a measure of hostility).

Saying that fandom was one big happy family earned me a couple of Hugos. Saying that fandom, like the rest of North American society, was sexist and did not necessarily treat women as individuals unless they denied the existence of sexism and denied their womanhood, earned me abuse. (5)

Wood earned those Hugos for her fandoms. Among the issues she started to complain about in fandom that earned abuse were the appearance of strippers or near-naked women as part of worldcon masquerades: “Complaining about dirty-jokes panels and strip-tease acts at…conventions was 'crazy libbers’ behavior, 'making a fuss about nothing’ (again), and terribly ‘uptight’” (5).

Many of the women joining fandom in the late '60s and early '70s were also in the process of having their consciousness raised by feminist ideas—a development that jarred with many of the attitudes in their “second home” of fandom. As Wood noted, feminist fans were stimulated and encouraged in their efforts to change fandom by the writings and debates (in fandoms, magazines and cons) of authors such as Joanna Russ and Vonda N. McIntyre. Not all fans were so receptive, however, as in some venues, “Joanna, Vonda, and a very few supporters were rously trashed for being bitter, vicious feminist bitches” (5).

In 1974, Wood was asked to moderate the first worldcon panel to address women’s issues, “Women in SF: Image and Reality,” at Discon II. Feminist fans such as Jennifer Bankier felt the panel was constrained by the presence of Leigh Brackett and Betty Ballantine—older women “who had made peace with the male-dominated field [and] said that women had suffered no discrimination” (Wood 1978: 6; see also J. Bankier 1974). The real debate happened in the hall and other rooms afterwards—an event many feminist fans pinpoint as their first realization of the potential and strength of feminist feeling amongst fans (see, for example, Gomoll 1986-87: 9). From this event flowed many other panels on women in sf and feminist issues: a Women’s APA (AWA) started by Janet Small and Victoria Vayne, a women-only space at cons (A Room of Our Own), and feminist zines such as Janus (Wood 1978: 7). WisCon, held in 1976 (and continuing to this day), was the first sf convention to concentrate on feminist programming.

**Feminist community building: The 1970s**

The feminist zines produced in the 1970s are some of the few sources available for tracing the formation and development of feminist fan communities. The first, edited by Canadian Amanda Bankier, was *The Witch and the Chameleon* (*Watch*), which only ran for six issues, from August 1974-1976. *Janus* was the longest running feminist zine, beginning in 1975 and continuing as *Aurora* from 1981 through to 1987, with a delayed final issue in 1990.6 There were, however, other zines concerned with issues of gender and sexuality during this period. Jessica Amanda Salmonson edited *Windhaven*, and Seth McEvoy’s *Pig Runners’ Digest* (c. 1975) was described as “a discussion forum for writers on the topic of sexism and sexual preference in science fiction” (A. Bankier 1975: 42). *Women and Men* edited by Denys Howard (c. 1977) was considered in a review by Susan Wood as “the

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4 Wood mentions that McIntyre got “into a shouting match with Lester Del Rey about women” on a “women in sf” panel at Pglange in 1970—perhaps the first such panel (1978: 5).

5 *Janus* was initially edited by Janice Bogstad and Jeanne Gomoll, with help from the Madison sf group, *SF*, then by a collective from 1981, with Bogstad leaving to form another zine, *New Moon: A Quarterly Journal of Feminist Issues in SF*. (Unfortunately, apart from a couple of specific articles, I was not able to obtain copies of this zine.)
most open and challenging of the new fanzines... an anti-sexist fanzine and letter-forum. Editor Denys Howard is a self-styled ‘faggot’—an ‘effeminist’” (Wood 1977: 44). Another feminist personalzine was Orca by Jennifer Bankier (sister of Amanda, editor of Watch), which aimed to publish “items with a feminist, socialist-anarchist...humanist, or aesthetic persuasion” (cited in Wood 1977: 44). Avedon Carol’s genzine (sometimes personalzine) The Invisible Fan (first published in 1976) also reflected, as its title suggests, Carol’s feminist commitments.\(\textsuperscript{5}\)

My construction here of feminist fan communities is necessarily constrained by my access to sources, with Janus/Aurora and Watch being the only fanzines available to me.\(\textsuperscript{7}\) However, since Janus/Aurora was so long-running and the Madison group has, with the yearly WisCon, remained at the forefront of feminist fan activity well into the twenty-first century, this community is an important one in the interaction of feminism and sf. Other forums vital to this construction process are now largely inaccessible, such as the debates and planning of club meetings, APAs, formal programming and informal chats at conventions. Some of the fervor and excitement of this period is, nevertheless, suggested through the letters and con reports available in these fanzines.

Jointly, Janus and Watch signaled the growing number of fans (particularly women) who wanted to bring together their commitment to women’s liberation with their fan interests.\(\textsuperscript{8}\) As Rhoda Katerinsky, an editor at Ms. Magazine, commented in a 1976 letter to Watch:

There is a growing feminist movement within SF fandom, and results can be seen already. At the cons and meetings, sooner or later a little knot of women gathers in a corner and has a small c-r session, that covers not only SF but the whole feminist field, and we get support from each other and swap stories, feelings, and sisterly raps. Sometimes we also have sisterly fights, but almost everyone comes away from one of those mini-raps with another friend, and a feeling of belonging. And that is what fandom is all about. (1976: 25)

\(\textsuperscript{5}\) Background information provided by personal interview with Carol, 22 July 1996.

\(\textsuperscript{7}\) And these only as I managed to buy or get copies of them at WisCon 20. My thanks to editors Jeanne Gomoll and Amanda Bankier for their assistance in obtaining these copies.

\(\textsuperscript{8}\) For example, a letter from fan Kris Fawcett commented on the “steadily growing feminist element” in sf fandom in the early 1970s (1974: 4).

Rather than an all-male preserve celebrating the (masculinist) concerns of sf, fandom was seen by many women as a potential haven for the kinds of community and networking inspired by Women’s Lib—a place to build “a room of one’s own.” Indeed, at the 1978 WesterCon, the first women-only space at a con was organized by Susan Wood, called “rooms of our own,” which became features of other conventions (Gomoll 1986-87: 9).

The response to Janus (and Watch) was an enthusiastic welcome from many female fans. Linda E. Bushyager’s review of Janus commented: “It’s basically a genzine, but fairly oriented towards SF—in particular, they’ve been running some of the best feminism-in-sf discussions around (it’s popping up all over, gang! Whoopee!)” (L. Bushyager 1977: 11). The appearance of forums for feminist debate was similarly welcomed by Wood in a review of Watch.

For many of us, it’s become indispensable: a rap group with friends, a support system, a source of laughter, insight and ideas. And...I am recommending it equally for...its approach, its politics, its community of interest: women, and the few men joining with us, concerned with sexism in the supposedly visionary SF world. (1977: 44)\(\textsuperscript{9}\)

For Wood, such fanzines signaled a “real, positive change...in fandom and fanzines: a broadening of the community and its approaches, not primarily to SF, but to living” (1977: 44). Janus in particular served a number of functions within the fan community. It provided a site for critical analysis, gathered information on contemporary and earlier female writers, and was a forum for debate through letters and editorials. Janus created a space where the editors’ and readers’ dual interests in feminism and sf could interact, and in the process, function as a kind of praxis.

The editors’ vision for Janus was outlined by Janice Bogstad in 1977.

As my co-editor, Jeanne Gomoll, so aptly put it when we were criticized for militant feminism and political stances in some editorials, at this point we are not so much trying to change other people’s minds with our writing as we are trying to develop our own consciousness. The kind of amateur

\(\textsuperscript{9}\) Unfortunately, this was the last issue of Watch to appear.
writing and publishing that exists in fandom offers us a vital opportunity to explore such issues as feminist consciousness and language...even the possible effects of scientific developments on women... Increasingly as time goes by, feminist issues have become easier to explore in the context of fandom, partially because SF novels themselves explore such issues. (1977: 7)  

Readers and fans were thus developing feminist ideas in tandem with (and sometimes ahead of) the writers and texts they engaged with in the sf community; just as the writers were also “communicating with fan organizations and publications about their ideas in the process of developing them” (Bogstad 1977: 7). The tide of letters debating feminist issues indicates that many other readers—women and men—participated in this “development of consciousness.” Indeed, the letters of comment (locs) in these zines often displayed evidence of struggles over the meaning and impact of feminism between male and female fans. Readers Adrienne Fein and Karen Pearlschtein, for example, expressed impatience with “male travelers” who “expect to give us equality in return for rewards” or who merely “tolerated” feminism (Fein 1977: 50; Pearlschtein 1977: 28; see also B.E. Brown 1978: 62).  

“An evolution of consciousness”:  
Bradley, fandom, and feminism  

Of course it was not only men who might display antagonistic or ambivalent attitudes to feminism in fandom. A fascinating exchange occurred between Bradley and feminist writers and fans in the pages of Watch, a debate that illuminated her uneasy relationship with the women’s liberation movement generally and with the feminist fan community (and latterly, feminist sf critics). One of the best-selling contemporary sf authors, Bradley’s beginnings were in the fan community, a link she maintained and encouraged through the specialized Darkover fandom, with which she was intimately connected for a number of years, editing collections and publishing a magazine (Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine).  

The exchange was sparked by McIntyre’s stringent feminist critique of Bradley’s Darkover Landfall and included letters from writers such as Russ and Tiptree (using the name Racoona Sheldon), as well as two from Bradley herself (McIntyre 1974; Bradley 1978). Darkover Landfall begins with a spaceship crash-landing on an unknown planet and follows the survivors’ attempt to re-create civilization. Their efforts are complicated by a conceit of the plot postulating a heavier gravity than that of Earth, which apparently dramatically increases the risks of pregnancy and necessitates the inactivity of pregnant women. One of the central female characters, Camilla Del Rey, becomes pregnant and is forced by the needs of the community to accept her condition against her will and relinquish her scientific duties for a life of largely inactive breeding.  

The plight of this character, the motivation for rendering women in such a compromised situation, and various passages about women’s role in society and the women’s liberation movement are the focus of McIntyre’s critique. “In Darkover Landfall, MZB shows that she deeply distrusts and dislikes the feminist movement... She has, it seems, taken her views from anti-feminists who believe feminism to be the result of raging hormones, over-crowding, and a pathological hatred of children” (McIntyre 1974: 20). McIntyre’s overall judgment is that the book is nothing less than a “strike against the feminist movement” (1974: 24).  

The notion that Darkover Landfall was Bradley’s deliberate attack on feminism was highlighted by McIntyre’s citation of a particularly damning speech by one of the male characters, addressed to Del Rey:  

Man is a rationalizing animal, so sociologists called it “women’s Liberation” and things like that, but what it amounted to was a pathological reaction to over-population and over-crowding. Women who couldn’t be allowed to have children,  

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10 This article was taken from an academic paper Bogstad delivered at the Symposium on Post Industrial Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, organized by the then-head of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, Teresa de Lauretis, who along with Bogstad, Samuel Delany, and Darko Suvin participated in a workshop on sf.

11 The name of this character appears to be a deliberate reference to Lester Del Rey. Bradley claimed that this book was a direct response to a statement made by Del Rey: “Once Lester Del Rey stood up at a conference and said that it didn’t matter a particle to him if 95% of the human race died out. ‘As long as enough survive to keep our technology alive,’ he said, ‘That’s all it needs to take us to the stars. And that’s all that matters.’ That outraged me.” And the result was Darkover Landfall (see Bradley 1977/1978: 16).
had to be given some other work, for the sake of their mental health. But it wears off... By the time the baby comes, you'll probably have normal hormones too, and make a good mother. (Bradley 1978; cited in McIntyre 1974: 23)

McIntyre's attribution of this opinion to Bradley was perhaps misleading—as Bradley herself later pointed out, a character's statements do not, of course, always reflect the beliefs of the author. However, the undertow of anti-feminist feeling in the book was further suggested by a statement made elsewhere by Bradley (which was pointedly placed after Bradley's rebuttal of McIntyre's review in the third issue of WatCh): "My latest book, Darkover Landfall, is supposed to be my attack on a world which equates civilization with energy consumption (with a few scathing snarls at Women's Lib)" (Bradley 1975a: 30). Bradley's initial reaction to McIntyre's review was to argue that the feminist and anti-feminist statements in the book were only a secondary theme (1975a: 29). In one of the few letters supporting Bradley, Jacqueline Lichtenberg wrote that she,

flatly disagree[d] with Vonda's review... I know something of what went into that book, and polemics was not one of the ingredients. For every anti-feminist statement there is a pro-feminist statement elsewhere to balance it and the emphasis is on the TEARING IRONY of technological Woman thrown back to the status of breed cow. (Lichtenberg 1975: 28)

In a second letter in issue four, Bradley gave a more detailed response, along with some fascinating background information on her personal convictions. Allowing the reproduced quote about "Women's Lib" to stand, Bradley clarified her position as an attack on a certain sub-strata of feminism—what she termed the "man-hating" castrating "variety"/stereotype, which was her only understanding of the movement at the time of writing Darkover Landfall (1975b: 19).

12 Bradley accused McIntyre of falling into the trap of viewing this character as a "voicepiece of the author stating...her private convictions" (Bradley 1975a: 29).
13 Quoted from The Alien Critic, vol. 2, no. 4, #7, 1973, p. 22.
14 Lichtenberg began as a writer of Trek fiction for zines, then wrote professional Star Trek novels and her own series of Sime/Gen novels. She was a friend of Bradley's, and they used to exchange drafts of their work daily when writing novels (see Bradley 1977/1978: 19).

In a review of her life experiences, Bradley argued that sf was the first "genuinely non-sexist world" she encountered outside her own family, and that women who railed against sf's sexism were merely looking for a scapegoat to cover their own failure (1975b: 20). Recalling her own experiences, Bradley argued that "freedom" should be seen in perspective:

I grew up on a farm, and one takes it for granted there that women can work as hard as men. I did a man's work until I was in my late teens, and it seemed a positive pleasure to be able to spend my days at housework... The woman who spends her adolescence stacking hay, driving cows, milking and mucking out barns is not going to scream with agony at being allowed to spend her twenties and thirties making a few beds, cooking a few meals, washing a few dishes, and having the rest of her time, as I did, to do as much writing as I wanted. (1975b: 19)

She continued "Thank God I can [make my living]...at a dishpan and over a crib, where my hands are busy and my mind free, instead of working at some brain-grating office job which leaves my mind too jangled to think" (21). This argument would seem to be what "Racoona Sheldon" (her true identity still secret) termed the "I've made it why can't you" syndrome in an earlier issue of WatCh. Responding to a similar argument presented by Katherine Kurtz at a con panel, Sheldon called for a united front, as "the woman who makes it personally and alone is impoverished by the plight of her sisters, and has in effect accepted an insane reality" (1975: 26; The Katherine Kurtz comment was outlined in J. Bankier 1974).

Bradley's views here contrast sharply with a moving article written by a woman of a similar generation and circumstance (married with children), Kate Wilhelm (1975). Wilhelm was also seen as a problematic figure by feminist critics; indeed, Wilhelm's The Clewiston Test was the subject of a number of critical letters to Janus concerning the negative representation of lesbianism in the book (see, for example, Lynn 1977: 26; Salmonson 1977: 19, and Gomoll 1977).

15 "[W]hen I hear a woman say that her work has been rejected because she was a woman, I can only assume that she would rather think it was rejected because she was a woman, than accept the hard fact that it was probably rejected because it just wasn't a good story" (Bradley 1975b: 20).
ed. comment). Wilhelm emphasized the immense difficulties faced by women attempting to make a career of writing. “There is prejudice from the first, originating in the beginning with the family. They'll think it's cute, or precocious, or at least, not dangerous, when a woman starts to write stories” (1975: 21). Wilhelm’s article addressed the generational conflict that seems to inform Bradley’s difficulty with many feminist critiques, between women who had “made it alone” and those decrying an “unequal playing ground.” Wilhelm recognized the impatience shown by some women who had succeeded in writing sf (including herself), “when we have had it with too many young writers who want someone else to come along and chop down the maze for them... What the older, established writers can give is not a secret of how to do it, but rather encouragement, testimony, support, and occasionally a good swift kick” (23). In the following issue “Raccoon Sheldon” pointed to “the genuine generation gap” between Bradley and the younger feminists: “I've known some of those strong, inner-directed women who grew up on farms or in small towns and simply decided the world — not themselves — was crazy when they hit the social barriers.” Such women, argued Sheldon, were not necessarily competitive with other women — including Bradley — but had the luck to “grow up unsquashed” (1976: 30).

One of the most interesting facets of the Watch Ch debate is the changing response to Bradley as she reveals more of herself in subsequent letters. The letters from Russ, in particular, gradually retreat from strident critique of Bradley’s work toward a “gentler” negotiation of issues and acceptance of the political validity of differing personal experiences. Russ’s first letter is an analytical critique of the assumptions about feminism displayed in Bradley’s response, which notes that the question “of whether a woman’s uterus belongs to her or to the community she happens to find herself in” was from the mid-’60s a “very hot political issue” that would necessarily provoke “vehement reactions” (Russ 1975a: 15). Russ argued that books such as Darkover Landfall (and all sf) could not be separated from the political and social assumptions underpinning them, and concluded that by relying on such assumptions, the book could be considered anti-feminist. Russ summed up the anger felt by feminist readers such as McIntyre:

[T]o falsify biology (which Bradley does grossly in assuming that high gravity will have no effect on men, and no other effects on anyone) and to drag Anatomy-is-Destiny out of three-thousand-year-old mothballs in order to do so, is not an answer. Or an advance. It’s the old you-can’t-win slap in the face again. (1975a: 18)

The debate takes on quite a different tone following Bradley’s second letter (in issue 4), where Bradley talked of her experience with local women’s groups and about her sexuality:

I have not really intended to become the spokesperson for the gay community in science fiction, but I have always known... that I was just as strongly homosexual as I was heterosexual... I have always felt free to write for lesbian publications, etc., under my own name, and have never made any secret of the fact that I consider myself at least bisexual, and probably, more honestly, an offbeat lesbian who simply manages to form occasional strong attachments to men. (Bradley 1975b: 22)

Bradley also claims to have been among the forefront of writers who were open about sexual and homosexual relationships in sf. She describes herself as “the first writer... to deal with a woman character as a fully sexual being” in her book The Bloody Sun (1964); in World Wreckers (1971) she depicted “explicit homosexuality,” and again in The Heritage of Hastur (1975); in Centaurus Changeling (1954) she “dealt with an intense, strongly emotionalized friendship between two women.” In The Shattered Chain she creates the Guild of Free Amazons (which in later books features lesbian relationships) although she claims she “chickened out on lesbianism” in this book (Bradley 1975b: 22-23).

16 She described a number of hurdles, such as convincing yourself to be a writer when others won’t accept you as such, knowing the limits of outside responsibilities and learning to say “no.” “I realized the world, everyone in it practically, will give more and more responsibility to any woman who will continue to accept it. And when the other responsibilities are too great, her responsibility to herself must go... It is generally expected that the children, the house, school functions, husband’s needs, yard, etc. all come first, and the time left over is hers to use as she chooses. A woman who is determined to write has to reverse that order, and it is hard” (Wilhelm 1975: 21).

17 Bradley goes on, rather strangely, to claim that “mainstream [fiction] has been wide open to lesbianism for forty years or so; in 1962, with two lesbian friends, I catalogued over a thousand titles” (Bradley 1975b: 22)—a view in sharp contrast with Russ’s discussion of lesbianism in her letter to the third issue of Watch Ch (Russ 1975c) and taken up by her second letter (Russ 1976: 11).
In Russ's second contribution, "A Letter to Marion Zimmer Bradley," she apologizes for her previous letter, describing it as "too flip" and "heartless," and admits admiration for Bradley's "hard work, her grit, her honesty, and her bravery"—whilst still disagreeing with Bradley on many points (1976: 9). In this letter, Russ provides an incisive review of the feminist movement, including the problems of "class snobbery and what...one might call...‘motherhood-snobbery’"—a result, argued Russ, of the initial, vehement reaction to sexism (9). This letter—the final contribution to the debate—is a wonderfully informed and persuasive delineation of many of the tenets of feminist arguments, which would have been at home in any academic journal. It demonstrates the sophisticated and committed level of engagement that could occur in a small, amateur publication in the "ghetto" of the sf field. The conflicts of generational, class, and personal difference evident in this "conversation" are neatly summed up by Russ, whose argument signals the importance and influence of personal "travels" through or against feminism(s).

I wish I could castigate Bradley as a sexist—which would make everything so easy!—but clearly she's not. I do have a horrible feeling, though, that much of what she says in her letter is exactly what I would've said in or about the winter and spring of 1968, which is when I first met feminism...I do feel that, having made sacrifices (including part of one's own personality) to get what one wanted, there's a strong human tendency to insist that the sacrifices were necessary. (1976: 12)

This was the last issue of Watch, and thus the end of the "conversation." However another debate featuring Bradley occurred in Janus/Aurora, provoked by comments about her book The Shattered Chain, which continued for five issues. In response to criticism from

Suzy McKee Charnas and Amanda Bankier, Bradley wrote: "I am not ashamed of Shattered Chain; it may have been a disappointment to women on the cutting edge of the front line of feminism, who wanted their ultimate wishes fulfilled in fiction." She continued:

But from the reactions I have received, it reached the audience I wanted: women still weighted with their "invisible chains" who, maybe, have begun to realize that maybe they are not as free as they thought they were, and may start wondering, thinking, maybe doing something, however small. I am not an innovator. I realized that long ago. I take radical ideas and make them popular, I sneak them in under the defenses of conservatives. (Round 2: Reactions to "Lunch and Talk" 1977: 32)

Establishing a demarcation between the "front-line feminists" associated with the Janus readership and newer writers (such as Charnas) and her own, more "populist" approach, Bradley called for recognition and compassion from "movement" women. A particularly interesting part of the exchange was Bradley's exploration of her bisexuality, sparked by comments that her status as a married woman protected her from the disapprobation accompanying the label "lesbian." She countered: "I am also sick and tired of having people think that being bisexual is somehow having the best of both worlds, that my marriage is some kind of 'protection.' Christ, no!" (Bradley 1977: 31; see also 39). An interesting plea for understanding appeared in a letter from lesbian author, Elizabeth Lynn.

[Writers] balance our own changing, growing consciousness, the needs (as we perceive them) of our audience, our editors' prejudices, and the demands of our characters...We all do it differently, as the controversy in Janus [8], centering around The Shattered Chain, points out. Writers change, writers grow (often through the medium of their own book). We are not consistent all the time. (Nor are the demands of the reading public.) It would be just, I think, if that public when it wears its critical hat remembers these facts and attempts to be kind. (1977: 26)

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18 This phrase is cited from Philip Slater (no reference given).

19 A good overview of the sheer volume, scope, and brilliance of Russ's writings, reviews, and letters can be sampled in her collection The Country You Have Never Seen (2007).

20 I use "travels" here to connect with Katie King's observations on personal reading histories (K. King 1994).

21 Lunch and Talk with Suzy McKee Charnas, Amanda Bankier, Janice Bogstad, and Jeanne Gomoll 1976; Round 2: Reactions to "Lunch and Talk" 1977.

22 Russ's response takes up Bradley's charges of feminist sf as "wish-fulfilment," and her argument for the worth of a populist (if less radical) approach (Round 2: Reactions to "Lunch and Talk" 1977: 34-35).
Not a feminist, but...

As Lynn's words remind us, people change, as does feminism itself, and its relation to or resonance for individuals. A few years after these exchanges, Bradley offered some quite different reflections on women, sf, and feminism. In the article “My Trip Through Science Fiction,” she gave an alternative perspective on the “ease” of her achievements in sf, referring to the debate over Darkover Landfall. In contrast to her earlier picture of the housewife happily “fitting in” her writing, she painted a more oppressive image of her life in a small town, where her “strange obsession” with sf was not well understood by her husband. This is made clear in a description of her “escape” from her first marriage and Texas to go to Berkeley,

where I found a world sympathetic to writing as a career, and a husband who took it for granted that when there was an editor’s deadline coming up, the laundry could lie unwashed on the floor, and registered mail for a manuscript wasn’t something you had to sneak out of the housekeeping money. He’s a writer, too. I sometimes think a woman writer should only marry another writer. (Bradley 1977/1978: 14)

A mark of Bradley’s changing consciousness is her admission, which she had previously refused to divulge, that the source of her first sf novel sprang from personal experience. From the perspective of the late-1970s, Bradley recognized in The Door Through Space (1961) (a “rough sketch” for her later Darkover novels), “a portrait of [her] own younger self, trapped and savage in a hopeless marriage; a woman chained” (Bradley 1977/1978: 17). Bradley traced her evolving personal consciousness through to her recent work, which produced a better resolution—and a more feminist one—than her first, “hidden” image of herself as Dallis, the chained wife.

Not for twenty years did I see that in Dallis I had created a portrait of myself, dying inside in the bleached and barren lands of the Texas desert; and not for twenty years did I manage to create for myself, in The Shattered Chain, a band of Amazons who ride to the Dry Towns to set a chained woman free. (17)

Bradley’s “Trip Through SF” also contains a reconsideration of the debate around Darkover Landfall (1977/1978: 16). Here Bradley accepts, to some extent, the “outrage” felt by feminist readers and situates the book as part of a dialogue, initially between herself and Del Rey, and carried on by Russ:

I am told...that Joanna Russ has written a novel where, in similar straights, the women of the colony refuse to bear children at all, on the grounds that a colony based on exploitation of women has no right to survive. Science Fiction writers are constantly amending, correcting, embellishing the ideas of their colleagues. (16)

The book referred to is Russ’s We Who Are About To..., in which actually only one woman refuses to have children and becomes embroiled in what Duchamp reads as a “life-and-death struggle over the politics of the body and a total breakdown in discourse” (2006a: 6). Russ totally overturns the precepts of Bradley’s book, where “the common good was held more important than the personal convenience of any one woman” (Bradley 1977/78: 16). Russ’s character declares: “I think that some kinds of survival are damned idiotic. So you want your children to live in the Old Stone Age? Do you want them to forget how to read? Do you want to lose your teeth? Do you want your great-grandchildren to die at thirty? That’s obscene” (Russ 1987: 24-25). Placed alongside Darkover Landfall and the WatCh debate, these texts provide a perfect example of some of the tensions, arguments, and possibilities evident in the cross-pollinating feminisms and sf stories of the mid-1970s.

At this stage, in the late 1970s, Bradley was more open about the constraints faced by women writers prior to the advent of feminist influences. Bradley admitted that, like other women writing for the pulps, her novels were constructed to appeal to a “masculine viewpoint” (which, well into the 1950s, meant few if any female characters, especially in active roles)—a necessary decision to ensure sales (see Bradley 1977/1978: 16; 1977: 34-35). After the failure of her first couple of novels (which centered on female characters), Bradley admitted that her desire for publication brought the realization that she “would have to write about men... This was simply the rules of the game, the economic facts of life in the market” (1977: 35). This would presumably have been in the early 1950s, before her first major

23 And in response to the standard argument that “Civilization must be preserved,” she answers: “Civilization’s doing fine...We just don’t happen to be where it is” (Russ 1987: 31).
sale, *Centaurus Changeling*, in 1953. *The Web of Darkness* (eventually published in 1983) is a fantasy about two sisters; *Window on the Night* (unpublished) was about the first moon flight, “according to a theory then current about the superior physical stamina of women, it dealt with a crew entirely composed of women” (35). 24 In “An Evolution of Consciousness” (1977; a title inferring at least some connection to the women’s movement), Bradley traces an impulse to present strong, independent women from her earliest writings: an impulse that (although curtailed by the pressures of the market) had, since the 1960s, developed into a focus of her work. Whilst “An Evolution” is colored by a rather defensive call to recognize her contributions to the development of women characters in sf, the earlier essay “My Trip” openly acknowledges the constraints imposed on her writing by the market and herself. Here, she admitted that “[n]ot till 1976 did I dare write openly about women, in *The Shattered Chain.*” By this time other women were entering the field, welcomed by Bradley as “sisters” and as an “exciting new development” in the sf world (Bradley 1977/1978: 19). 25 However, in “An Evolution,” she also revises her rather optimistic viewpoint concerning homosexuality. In a discussion of the lesbian possibilities of the Free Amazon “freemates” (Darilyn and Menalla) in her novel *Winds of Darkover*, she admits: “I didn’t stress their ‘marriage’; the book was written in 1970, and the lesbianism was (and is) a stronger taboo in science fiction than male homosexuality” (Bradley 1977: 39).

The narrative Bradley weaves around herself in such articles is of a writer whose desire to present equal female characters has gradually been allowed to (re)surface as the climate of sf “changed”:

> I can now write of [women] as I always knew them to be: strong, independent, courageous, no longer yielding even lip service to the custom that they must sit and wait for the men to rescue them. I don’t have to cover up their strength with a mask of conventional femininity. (Bradley 1977: 45)

Yet this is not to say that Bradley suddenly became comfortable with “feminism” or would have seen herself as part of a developing movement of feminist writers and readers of sf. Bradley’s reflective articles certainly display some revision of her opinion regarding feminist critiques of sf—partially redolent of Le Guin’s “Redux” with its reconsideration of her own earlier work. Unlike Le Guin, however, Bradley’s various commentaries remain contradictory, never comfortably resolving her position with regard to “feminism” and the “movement” (see Le Guin 1992b). In a later article published in the 1980s, much of Bradley’s antagonism to “mainstream” feminism (or its stereotype) is again prevalent. In this case, Bradley may have been reacting against one of the side effects of the growing feminist critical attention to sf, which reiterated the absence of women. Like Connie Willis, Bradley was at pains to contradict this myth: “I have often heard the conventional wisdom about women in science fiction; namely, that there aren’t any, or weren’t before 1961. There’s just one thing wrong with the conventional wisdom; it isn’t true” (Bradley 1988: 84). 26 As in Willis’s 1992 article, Bradley provided a list of female predecessors, from Tiptree, Norton, C.L. Moore, Leigh Brackett, and herself to Shelley and Inez Haynes Irwin, along with editors Dorothy McIlwraith and Mary Gnaedinger (Bradley 1988: 84-87). 27

Bradley also attacked what she saw as the accepted feminist view of earlier writers such as Leigh Brackett: that in their use of “male” pseudonyms, male characters and points-of-view, they were writing “like a man” and “selling out to the male establishment” (1988: 87). 28 In Bradley’s narrative, a legitimate feminist critique of the restrictive circumstances of the early sf field—from audience expectations to editors and publishing concerns—is perceived as a personal attack.

24 Around this time there was an article in the British magazine *Authentic* on this issue, arguing that women would make better astronauts than men (Downe 1955).

25 This article also refers to a time when Bradley wanted to quit sf, until Anne McCaffrey gave her a copy of Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Bradley 1977/1978: 15); as a result, she wrote: “my discouragement with the whole world of science fiction suddenly left me” (Bradley 1977/1978: 19).

26 Unfortunately, the original publication details for the articles in this collection are not given.

27 Inez Haynes Irwin (who also published under the name Inez Haynes Gilmore) wrote the fantasy *Angel Island* in the 1920s, which, according to Bradley, “proved, without alienating the male audience for whom it was written, to be a most powerful metaphor of feminism” (Bradley 1988: 85). (Note Gilmore was her first husband’s surname and Irwin was her second husband’s.) Dorothy McIlwraith was editor of *Weird Tales* after the death of Fritz Leiber, and Mary Gnaedinger edited *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* (see also C. Willis 1992).

28 Bradley cites Pamela Sargent’s view of Brackett presented in the introduction to *Women of Wonder*: “She writes like a male, and a male steeped in machismo at that” (Bradley 1988: 87).
on the credibility of the individual women who, despite these constraints, succeeded in the field. Indeed Bradley herself implicitly recognized such constraints, arguing that Brackett “filled the perceived needs of the marketplace.”

True, her stories told of the dealings of men; so did mine... All science-fiction stories in the forties and fifties were about men; Leigh could not have sold them otherwise. Had she chosen to write solely about women, she could only have published them at a vanity press. (1988: 88)

Bradley exaggerated here; Judith Merril, Carol Emshwiller, and Zenna Henderson among others wrote stories from a woman’s perspective in the 1940s and 1950s—and they, too, have been subject to similar feminist critiques of the limitations of their work (whether or not dictated by the social and cultural context).29 Bradley, along with a number of other female writers whose careers started before the 1960s, has until recently been largely absent from feminist taxonomies within sf (see for example, Yaszek 2008). Throughout the numerous articles in which Bradley erratically engages with “women’s issues,” a common thread is her determination to be able to define her own “brand of feminism.” Indeed, in a 1985 article, Bradley shows awareness of and concern for many issues central to feminism. Commenting on the rise of Darkover fandom around her books, she felt that she had made available a site for fans to discuss,

especially sensitive subjects on which I can only touch in my books. It is easier, and safer, for these young people to talk about women’s rights, homosexuality, unusual approaches to religion, gender roles in society, and extrasensory perception on Darkover rather than in the worlds of suburbia or middle America where they themselves live. (Bradley 1985: 80)30

This “trip” through some of Bradley’s interactions and altercations with certain sections of the women’s movement suggests the boundaries of the feminist community/ies being built in sf in the early to mid-1970s. Like a number of other authors (from Russ and Le Guin to Norton), Bradley engaged in dialogues with excited, younger sf readers with feminist commitments in the pages of Watch and Janus (and with different communities of fans and writers in other fanzines). An important focus for this communication between young feminist fans (and authors) and older female writers was the fans’ attempt to reconcile their current (1970s) desires with the material that guided their entry into sf. Work by authors such as Bradley, Norton, and McCaffrey, which had portrayed strong women, had often served as “rite of passage” books for the ‘60s and ‘70s generations of female readers. Yet by the mid-1970s, such material no longer produced the “click” of consciousness some readers required for a feminist “sense of wonder” (Wood 1978/1979: 10; see also Kelso 2000).

**Writing feminist fandom into being**

In the late 1970s, Janus provided the only dedicated space for serious, feminist analysis of sf, producing criticism that was as sophisticated as the articles that had begun to appear in sf journals a few years earlier. This is not really surprising, since most of the earlier articles appearing in the more “academic” forum of the journals were written by women who were also fans, or writers involved in the fan community, such as Russ, Badami, and Friend. Examples included critical reviews of collections of women’s sf such as New Women of Wonder and Cassandra Rising (Gomoll 1978/1979b: 32-36; Kidd 1978; Laurence 1978; Sargent 1978b), articles such as Gomoll’s “Post-Holocaust Themes in Feminist Science Fiction” (1980), and reviews of feminist anthropology and science texts (Lucas 1981/1982, 1982). Another important critical function of the zine was the effort to recover “herstory” by building a bibliography of female and feminist writers. Sparked by an interest in the rapidly increasingly proportion of female sf writers since 1970, Bogstad began a project to document this “manifestation.” The project included interviews with newer female sf writers and the compilation of an audio and visual archive of readings and interviews with a broad range of female authors (Bogstad 1978/1979). Bogstad’s editorial announcing the project included a preliminary list of 49 female writers, which Bogstad invited readers to expand on (1978/1979: 7). A couple of issues later the results of

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29 Indeed, Bradley goes on to mention one of Merril’s novels, Shadow on the Hearth, as a “successful attempt to write typical women’s fiction within the context of science fiction”; however, she classes it (as some feminist critics have done) as a story more suitable to the Ladies’ Home Journal (1988: 91-92). See Yaszek (2008) for a more nuanced consideration of these writers.

30 See also Bacon-Smith for reports from fans and writers who found a “haven” in darkover fandom and its conventions, such as Melissa Scott (2000: 116-20).
and respected female writers had come to be almost totally forgotten. A pertinent example is deFord, whose reputation diminished rapidly, because she wrote only short stories, collections of which quickly went out of print. Yet, as this article points out, her work was quite radical: “A veteran of the first women’s movement, she had already re-visioned perspectives the second movement had to discover again” (Stallings 1984: 18). A couple of the “Invisible Women” articles are predecessors to the feminist academic interest in the nineteenth-century origins of women’s sf writing, with an excellent examination of Gilman’s Herland, which, although “rescued” in the 1970s was not often discussed in terms of the speculative/sf tradition (Cline 1984; Enrys 1984).

“Feminism isn’t fannish”

Although the feminist readers of Janus recognized and valued the contributions made by “pre-movement” women writers, other “femme-fans” were not as ready to consider female contributions to sf and fandom in terms of feminism. The very precept on which this feminist community was based—as a space for the interaction of sf fan interests and feminist commitments—was still an issue of some controversy, with at least one (female) fan declaring that “feminism isn’t fannish” (attributed to Victoria Vayne in Gomoll 1978: 3). The notion that fandom should be a haven for “apoliticism” is evident in some of the debate surrounding Janus’s Hugo nomination for best fanzine. In a 1978 editorial, Gomoll reported that fans had complained that Janus was nominated for its politics rather than its quality (Gomoll 1978: 3). In a letter, Victoria Vayne expressed her unease that the nomination resulted from the backing of “politically motivated voters,” and added that she would be happier if Janus was on that ballot solely because of its quality (1978: 65). Objections followed: Adrienne Fein argued that Janus’s feminism was part of its quality, adding “I would not feel comfortable nominating a zine which went in for tred old sexist jokes even if the quality was otherwise good” (1978/79: 49-50). Others agreed that they would not vote for offensive zines, and pointed out the over-reaction implied by charges of bloc voting. “A few female fans vote for Janus, and we hear loud cries of bloc voting;

31 This list is a classic illustration of the invaluable bibliographic work produced by fandom because of the extensive resources and knowledge of its members, and their willingness to contribute to a collective effort.
32 In this letter she also mentions Doris Piserchia as a writer who deserves a wider audience. Another writer mentioned was Naomi Mitchison, whose Memoirs of a Spacewoman later attracted feminist interest through the Women’s Press reissue in 1985 (Chatelain 1984: 7).
33 Here is evidence of the fact that Lindsay—part of the 1950s group of female fans in Britain—was still active and indeed showed interest in the new generation of female fandom.
if a majority of male fans vote for, say, Locus, do we postulate that this is bloc voting?” (Logan 1978/1979: 51). Terry Garey also good-humoredly criticized the notion of a bloc vote:

Come now, Victoria, surely from your personal experience with A Woman’s APA you must realize that we never presented a united front about anything. At the time of the nominations, several members were not speaking to one another… What you have managed to do, Victoria, is perpetuate the rumor that feminist fans are out to take over fandom. Come to think of it, what a great idea! Thanks! Today, Madison, then the Hugos, and then…then…why, then the world! Heh, heh, heh! (1978/1979: 50)

The question of whether or not “politics” had any place in fandom arose even more forcefully with reference to activities at conventions: two interesting examples surrounded the second WisCon and the 1978 WorldCon. Janus contained numerous reports on the state of feminist programming at various conventions, including the worldcons, with details of events such as a “gay party” (distributing buttons “Happy Gays Are Here Again”) and programming on items like “sexism in fandom” and “Feminism and Fandom.” Although such feminist programming was becoming more frequent in the late 1970s, it was not without opposition, also becoming “the target of more and more frequent jokes and sometimes, too, of open anger and resentment by those people who think fandom is no place for feminism…or that sexism simply doesn’t happen in fandom and doesn’t need to be dealt with” (Gomoll 1977: 22). Gomoll gives an example of such opposition, an article by Ted White in Scintillation #13, which “speaks for the people who are angered by what they see as a separatist movement within SF fandom that is detrimental to its structure” (1977: 22). Even within the sf group that organized WisCon and Janus, there was controversy over the place and function of feminist activities, with debate after the second WisCon over whether or not to continue with its “feminist slant.” This was, apparently, a difficult convention, and complaints were heard afterwards about the feminist bias: although, as many readers commented, only about a quarter of the programming was feminist, and as Jane Hawkins remarked, “[a]nyone who went there and didn’t expect a lot of feminist stuff was a fool.” Hawkins continued:

Hey, two feminist GoHs, a zine known as feminist, and a con billed that way — where is the surprise? Sure, someone who was hostile to or bored by feminism wouldn’t have liked WisCon. BFD. They can go to over a hundred different cons for their belly dancers and sexist jokes. WisCon drew people from all over the country because it was a feminist con, and where else do you find that? (1978: 66; see also Morse 1978)

The divisive opinions concerning the presence of feminism in fandom were illustrated even more clearly in a conflict arising over IguanaCon in 1978, concerning the Equal Rights Amendment Bill (ERA). The National Organization of Women (NOW) led a campaign for economic boycotts against the states that had not ratified the ERA, and in a perfect example of feminist praxis in fandom, this became a pressing issue for a number of fans because IguanaCon was to be held in an unratified state, Arizona.

Debate about the issue surfaced in Janus with the publication of “A Statement of Ethical Position by the WorldCon Guest of Honor,” Harlan Ellison (Ellison 1977: 32-33). Ellison apparently was torn between his position as GoH (accepted before the NOW campaigns began) and support for the ERA, which he felt meant he should boycott the con. After consultation with writers and fans such as Le Guin, Russ, McIntyre, Bradley, and Susan Wood, Ellison decided to attend the con, but “in the spirit of making the convention a platform for heightening the awareness of fans,” and he promised to coordinate with NOW and other pro-ERA elements to publicize the situation (Ellison 1977: 32). He urged fans to follow his lead in withholding as much money from the state as possible, by camping out rather than staying in the

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35 It is interesting to note that Vayne was not necessarily anti-feminist, being a member of the Women’s APA.
36 These examples are from Suncon, 35th World Sf Convention, 1977 (reported in Gomoll 1977): (Also at the gay party was Avedon Carol in what would become an infamous masquerade costume—holding whips and accompanied by two “Slave Boys of Gor”!)
convention hotel and even bringing in their own food (33). Arguing that, despite the rhetoric of sf as a socially conscious literature, the sf community generally shied away from pressing contemporary issues, Ellison asked, “let’s just for once, in the world of SF, walk the walk and not just talk the talk” (33).

A selection of the replies Ellison received was published in a later issue, arguing both for and against his position, or various facets of it. A number of feminist fans voiced their support, including a staff member of NOW, and another who described the “excitement we feel that an Important Person is doing something difficult for him to help the cause of the ERA” (Crimmins 1978: 70; see also Fein 1978; Lucero 1978; Quindlen 1978). Others supported the ERA but not Ellison’s method of protest, which they felt would hurt both the convention and local small businesses without any effect on the county or state. A number of fans were apparently diametrically opposed to Ellison’s stance; he received six letters in one day “from SF fans—all male, five in states that haven’t ratified—assuring me I’m an asshole, subversive beyond belief in my efforts to ‘undermine fandom’ and piss on their convention” (Ellison 1978: 70).

The fairly common fannish distaste for the intrusion of “mundane” politics into fandom did not alone account for the animosity towards the ERA boycott displayed in some quarters. Ellison pointed out to potential opponents that there was a “recent precedent for utilizing a worldcon for moral ends” in Robert Heinlein’s publicizing a drive for blood donors (1977: 33). Many fans, however, obviously saw feminism as somehow more “political” than other “liberal” or moral issues. As Anne Laurie Logan’s letter noted, “no charges of ‘politicking’ were raised when Heinlein used his position as GoH to ask for blood, or when numerous fans made themselves heard and even obnoxious in defense of L-5 or NASA” (1978/1979: 51). Upholding the status quo (including sexism) was, apparently, not seen as a “political” act.

The outcome of Ellison’s position at IguanaCon was not discussed in the following issues of Janus, although a con report by Gomoll praised the “fantastic” feminist programming (“there was not just the one or two obligatory ‘women’s panels’ at which all women participating in programming were to be found”) (1978/1979a: 3). Feminist issues and the ERA were obviously a visible presence, generating much excitement and enthusiasm amongst feminist fans.

People changed their minds, they were moved as a result of [the] panels. Ask Susan Wood, who during her participation on a number of panels, encountered women who were reconsidering their opposition to the ERA as a result of some of the talking that went on... It was exciting!... It occurred to me then, and I still feel so now, that we’ve passed some sort of great divide.... We don’t have to argue for basic programming and discussion on these vital subjects any longer. We won’t often be “given” a token women’s panel to appease us and keep us quiet any more. (It’s a tradition!)

(Gomoll 1978/1979a: 3-4)

A number of fascinating letters and articles from male fans testify to the impact that feminist programming had on some fans previously underexposed to literate feminists. Jon Singer wrote of WisCon 3 that he was “still boiling with ideas... I came away also, perhaps a notch more radical than I arrived” and went on to outline his changed understanding of “patriarchy” and women’s oppression (Singer 1979: 16).

How (not) to suppress feminist fandom

The feeling that feminism was in fandom to stay, that feminist, gay, and lesbian issues could no longer be excluded from fan debate, did not last for long. By the 1980s, many conventions had not embraced Wood’s ideal of “people’s programming,” but had remained at the level of the ubiquitous “women in SF panels,” which slowly settled into a “generic” panel subject to mild ridicule (Gomoll 1986-87: 9). In her “Open Letter to Joanna Russ,” published in 1987, Jeannie Gomoll expressed her fear that the history and achievements of feminist fandom were being forgotten, suppressed, or rewritten:

41 The programming was organized by Hilde Hildebrand.
Today I sit in the audience at all-male “fandom of the ’70s panels”…and don’t hear anything of the politics, the changes, the roles that women played that decade (except sometimes, a little chortling aside about how it is easier now to get a date with a female fan). (1986-87: 9)

In this account, feminist influence appears as a brief hiatus, with fandom reverting to the scenario portrayed by Wood of the “All Our Yesterdays” fahistory display in 1973 (Wood 1978: 5).42 The only response to this suppression was, as Gomoll suggested, a concerted effort by feminist fans to re-tell their histories and ensure that their memories were available to new generations of fans: “If we ourselves forget, why should we expect new generations of readers and fans to dig up the truth about what really happened?” (1986-87: 10). Unfortunately, one of the best avenues for ensuring continued visibility and “balanced retrospectives” was itself in the process of disappearing. Four years after Gomoll’s essay appeared in Aurora 26, the last issue was published, fulfilling Gomoll’s fears that the fanzine was floundering because of a “failure of energy” (10).

In a later retrospective, Gomoll noted that WisCon, as well as their fanzine, was under threat because of this lack of energy, as well as the general anti-feminist feeling resulting from the 1980s “backlash” years (2000). Despite almost “walk[ing] away from the convention towards the end of the 1980s,” Gomoll continued her involvement, as WisCon was revitalized in the 1990s and indeed grew far beyond expectations, celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2006 (co-chaired by Gomoll). The source of this revitalization was, for many, the announcement of the James Tiptree Jr. Award. At WisCon 15, in 1991, Diane Martin reported “participating in panel discussions that in feminist content and enthusiasm, rivaled the WisCons of the late ’70s” (1992: 3). Part of this excitement stemmed from Pat Murphy’s announcement during her GoH speech of a new sf award. Murphy talked of the need to challenge assumptions that feminism was passé—in both sf and society more generally. She related a conversation with Richard Kadrey, in which he suggested, “You know what would really piss people off? You ought to give out a women’s science fiction award” (Murphy 1991: 9). Murphy continued:

Okay, it was just a joke, nothing more. But a few weeks later, I had dinner with Karen Fowler and I mentioned this joke. Karen is also a trouble-maker, but a very thoughtful one. She looked thoughtful and said, “You know, there is no science fiction award named after a woman.”…

And then Karen, who tends toward brilliance, said, “What about James Tiptree Jr?” And it seemed like such a perfect idea. James Tiptree Jr. winner of multiple Nebulas, revealed in mid-career as Alice Sheldon, and forever after, in every introduction, revealed as Alice Sheldon. James Tiptree Jr., who helped break down the imaginary barrier between “women’s writing” and “men’s writing.” James Tiptree Jr., author of “The Women Men Don’t See.”…

And so I would like to announce the creation of the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, to be presented annually to a fictional work that explores and expands the roles of women and men. We’re still in the planning stages, but we plan to appoint a panel of five judges and we plan to finance the award—and this is another stroke of genius on Karen’s part—through bake sales. (If you want to volunteer to run a bake sale, talk to me after the speech.) (9)

The response was immediate, and the resulting “juggernaut” more than the founders could have dreamed. As Gomoll commented,

Pat was standing in front of a critical mass of people, all of whom cared deeply about the kind of science fiction that speaks to feminist values…who were feeling frustrated by politics of the day…Frankly, we were all in a mood to Do Something. So it shouldn’t have been a complete surprise that after Pat made her historic announcement, the crowd rose and cheered and clapped and laughed for a long, long time. And that we started to Do Things.… (2000: 3)

Within a few months, the first Tiptree Award cookbook was published, bake sales had been held, and the award was on its way to becoming a fixture, which as of 2009, is still going strong. Notwithstanding its success, the humor underlying the award has remained central: Murphy talks of the award as a subversive joke “that takes

42 Wood wrote of her realization that “All Our Yesterdays’ was a display of all men’s yesterdays, plus a photo of Joni Stopa in a fountain in a bikini” (1978: 5).
you by surprise and makes you blink and turns the world into a different place, much stranger and more wonderful than you ever thought possible” (Murphy and Fowler 2005: vii). The first joke is of course the name: the male pseudonym of a female sf writer whose work and life challenged so many assumptions about gender and sf, writing, and authorship. The bake-sales funding model (a deliberate ironic political statement) has become a feature of the award, as well as other non-traditional activities, including the publication of two cookery books. Apart from a monetary and travel award, the winners also receive an original piece of artwork specially commissioned each year by a female artist (as well as something made of chocolate, such as a plaque or typewriter).

The constitution and function of the panel of judges also attempts to disrupt traditional hierarchies and biases in sf (and other) awards. Central to Murphy and Fowler’s motivations in starting the award was the problem of ensuring realistic representation of women writers in the field, anthologies, and on award panels, rather than “tokenism.” Fowler reports that at the time, the Philip K. Dick Award had a “token female spot” on the jury:

And Pat and I started saying to each other, “Wouldn’t it be irritating to people if it were the other way around? What if we had a jury of five, and there was always one man, and never more than one man? Wouldn’t people find that outrageous in a way that they don’t find the situation on the Philip K. Dick jury outrageous?” (Lawrence 2004)

Beyond the “token man,” the jury also subverts the “usual hierarchy that is maintained by many literary awards, where only professionals are invited to be on the jury panel. The jury includes fans, writers, editors, booksellers, academics, even postgraduate students” (Larbalestier 2002: 215). The judging process itself is also a distinctive and important characteristic of the award, which works to acknowledge as many texts as possible, rather than just isolating one or two “of the best.” The traditional format of winners and losers is subverted through the simultaneous publication of the names of the winner/s, the titles short-listed for the award (now termed an Honor list), and the “long list” of all fiction considered, usually with fairly extensive annotations identifying why a text has won or been short-listed.

As Larbalestier has noted, many people “explicitly link the Tiptree to a renewal of a tradition of feminist science fiction” (2002: 208). For writer Susanna Sturgis, “the Tiptree Award has made feminism visible once again in the f/sf community and many believe that it has significantly affected what is being written and published” (1995: 52). The effects of the award on the broader sf community can be gauged not only from the enthusiasm and energy of the many fans who have contributed to the cook books, bake sales, and auctions, but also by the hostility shown in some quarters toward the award. To quote Sturgis again, “Even the grumbling — e.g., ‘I bet no man ever wins this award’— indicated the growing seriousness with which the Tiptree is taken” (52). Ironically, one of the most infamous complaints about the award became transformed into one of the best “in-jokes” and rallying calls for both the award and the feminist sf community. David Brin complained about the award’s failure to recognize his 1993 novel Glory Season (originally claiming in an interview that it was not considered, despite being listed on the short list, and later asking about the judging process during a WorldCon 1996 panel on the Tiptree Award) (Larbalestier 2002: 216). The notion that there was some sort of “feminist cabal” behind the Tiptree was consequently taken on board as yet another gleeful, humorous point of identification. The first anthology arising from the award, Flying Cups and Saucers, was edited by Debbie Notkin and “the Secret Feminist Cabal” (1998), while the 1998 WisCon t-shirt featured the iconic Tiptree Award “Space Babe,” with the motto “WisCon: home of the Feminist Cabal.”

By 2000, the cabal had even spawned its own placeholder website (not much more than the statement “The cabal is a secret

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43 The Bakery Men Don’t See and Her Smoke Rose Up from Supper. Both titles are puns on Tiptree stories, “The Women Men Don’t See” and “Her Smoke Rose Up Forever.”

44 For negative commentary, see for example Charles Platt (responding to the reprinting of Murphy’s “Illusion and Expectation” speech in the previous issue): “Awards are always a bad idea, and the Tiptree Award is even worse than usual, because it separates books by men from books by women as if the difference matters” (1992). The Tiptree Award, however, was never limited to work by women. Only a few years later, the Tiptree Award for 1995, presented at WisCon 20 was jointly awarded to Elizabeth Hand and Theodore Roszak, and indeed a number of men have won the award since.

45 The Space Babe image and tattoo is the mascot of the Tiptree Award; see http://www.tiptree.org/?see=spacebabe, which states: “Who roams the galaxy, single-handedly fighting injustice, oppression, and outdated portrayals of gender roles in
organization dedicated to gender-bending science fiction, temporary
tattoos and bake sales” with a link describing WisCon as the “femi-
nist cabal’s family reunion.”

Growing alongside and in support of the reinvigorated feminist sf community represented by WisCon and the Tiptree Award was the online face of feminist fandom. From early electronic lists such as Fem-SF and Feminist-SF, to the current explosion of websites, live-
journal communities, blogs, and wikis, feminist fandom has a strong
presence on the web. In addition to providing an invaluable forum for
discussion and promotion of venues such as WisCon, use of the internet
has seen feminist fandom extend its reach to a much broader com-
munity of readers who in the past may never have made the step to
active involvement such as convention-going or fanzine-reading.
Electronic communication has brought new people into the extended sf
community, allowing them more insight into and greater potential for
participation in fandom than ever before. Indeed, for many, lists such
as Fem-SF have been their first and only experience of fandom. Fem-
inist-SF, a list begun in 1997 as an alternative and supplement to the
“closed” Fem-SF list, is an interesting example. It quickly attracted
a diverse range of members, many of whom are feminist academics,
students, and science/technical workers who have been long-time sf
readers in isolation, outside the confines of fandom. Amongst general
debate on feminist issues, works of sf are discussed, bibliographical
information shared, reading lists built, and advice on teaching courses
given, in an expanded community that overlaps the writer/fan sf com-
munity. Thus, amongst feminist fans and well-known authors, such as
Griffith, Charnas, and McIntyre, are “neos” sf readers who have in
some cases not even heard of fannish traditions like the Worldcon.

More recently, initiatives such as Feminist SF — the Blog (http://
blogs.feministsf.net/) and the feminist sf wiki (http://wiki.feministsf.
net/) have appeared, alongside homepages and blogs for feminist sf
groups such as Aqueduct Press, the Broad Universe organization (for
promoting genre fiction by women), and the Feminist SF carnival (a
regular round-up of blog postings relating to feminist sf). Apart from
providing key forums for discussion outside physical spaces such as
WisCon, a greater diversity of fans and feminisms are visible, in par-
cular on sites by women of color such as “The Angry Black Woman”
Blog and author Nalo Hopkinson’s site. Efforts to call attention to
race in the sf community have also been galvanized by the estab-
ishment of the Carl Brandon Society, sparked at the 1999 WisCon (which
programmed more items on race in response to calls from people of
color). Taking its name from the “fake” black fan of the 1950s, the
society gives out two awards, The Parallax Award, for speculative fiction
by a person of color, and the Kindred Award, for speculative fiction
dealing with race and ethnicity. In 2007, the society also presented
the first Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarships, to enable writers of
color to attend Clarion workshops.

These activities have, as Duchamp observes, culminated in the
“creation of a feminist sf public sphere,” one that is more accessible
and geographically and demographically diverse than WisCon alone or
the sphere formed around early fanzines (2004a: 35). Having a greater
presence in the “public sphere” of the Net also means, of course,
greater opportunities for contact and conflict with non-feminist parts
of the sf community. Just as the Net has facilitated unique actions
such as the “slushbombing” of sf magazines (coordinating the sub-
mission of stories by women to certain magazines), it also means such
actions are subject to greater critique and even hostility. For some,
these reactions signal the rather depressing feeling that “we’re back
at the beginning” and having to argue yet again that sexism does exist
(Swirsky 2007: 19-21). For others, the Net lives up to its promise of
free and open communication or, in Liz Henry’s words, “the internets
work how they’re supposed to.” Reviewing the multitude of responses
to the “open source boob project,” Henry delighted in the fact that so

Other key blog carnivals include the People Of Color In Sci Fi & Fantasy Blog Carnival, see
50 Other online incidents of note that have galvanized both sexist debate and feminist
response are the 2006 Hugo Award incident where Harlan Ellison groped Connie Willis (the very same Ellison who so vocally fought for the ERA amend-
ments back in the ’70s), and the related “open source boob project.”

46 This site used to be available at http://www.feministcabal.org/; the text can still
be found at Broad Universe: http://www.broaduniverse.org/links.html.
many women (and men) made the internet “EXPLODE with mockery, outrage, anger, orneriness, analysis, questioning, and criticism. THAT’S how it’s supposed to work! The feminist blogosphere is swift and fierce! It lays out the issues, it gets its hands dirty, it disagrees and shouts and does it right. Go team!”

For most of the women (and men) involved in feminist fan activity since the 1970s, sf has provided a space in which to debate ideas about their life, society, and the future in a relatively open atmosphere where most voices are granted a hearing. Every hue of feminism(s) is apparent, ranging from “women’s interests” to radical lesbian-feminism and all points in between. Although disagreements and differences are evident within and between various groups and sub-communities, a common feeling running through these “sites” is that under the broad umbrella of sf fandom, these women and men have found a “home”—a place of belonging, creativity, and political praxis, where beliefs and identities can be affirmed. For some fans, sf groups or zines have been only one strand in a broader engagement with other feminist groups and publishing forums. For others, it has been the only sphere in which they would (or could) practice their personal form of feminist praxis. The sense of “homecoming” and “belonging” is a constant theme in accounts of the discovery of fandom: many fans describe their sense of being “outside” the dominant culture, of being “alien”—a feeling with obvious resonances for women.

Considering the amount of debate and often antagonistic conflict over the problems of sexism, chauvinism, and conservatism of much sf writing, the question arises—how then, has sf seemingly been such a fertile site for feminist activity, engagement, and thinking? An answer suggested by various discussions with fans is that while fandom (and sf) was (and is) sexist, it was not always as sexist as the “real world” and presented an opportunity for feminist women (and men) to actively change their environment. As Avedon Carol remarked, “We got a reaction in fandom that we didn’t get in the rest of the world—I mean, it worked!”

And despite various setbacks and continuing conflicts, the feminist communities forged in fandom in the 1970s seem to have survived the coming of new generations—bringing in their wake the hope that, perhaps this once, our recent feminist histories will not be forgotten.


52 Interview with Avedon Carol, London, 22 July 1996.