

ISSUE NO. 3**Introduction: Science Fiction and the Feminist Present****Alexis Lothian**

“The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (149). So Donna Haraway wrote in 1985 in “A Cyborg Manifesto.” When I composed a call for papers around this evocative line, I hoped to solicit work that would address the continuities and the transformations between the chimeric time of Haraway’s 1980s and our own uneven present, more than 20 years on. The response was successful beyond my wildest hopes. Feminist science fiction, in the collective analysis of the writers gathered here, proves to be a diverse and amorphous category in which real and imagined science and technology bleed into one another. The essays call attention to the ways in which fictions and realities of scientific speculation shape how we experience the nexus of gender, new media, and technology—from the gendered history of physics to the migration of brain-scanning technology out of laboratories and into the world, from imagined visions of reproductive technologies to sentient robots to the social consequences of cataclysmic change in urban landscapes.

Samuel R. Delany wrote in 1984 that science fiction is not about the future, but is rather a “significant distortion of the present” (177). In a world where not only technologies and their marketing but also social and political discourse draw continually from popular culture’s science fictions, this insight has grown ever more important. How do science fictions distort our perceptions of what is real and what is possible—and how should we mediate those distortions? Which should we critique and which should we embrace? If our times are science fictional, then the feminisms they demand must be technological and ripe for speculation. Joan Haran and Katie King’s essay calls for “science fiction feminisms” as well as “feminist science fictions” and “feminist sustainability”: this issue showcases the diversity of meanings contained in all three of these phrases.

The essays in this issue take us from the past, through Clarissa Lee’s reconsideration of the work of mid-20th-century physicists Emmy Noether and Maria Goeppert Mayer and Jamie “Skye” Bianco’s engagement with the race and class politics of New York City gentrification as refracted through art and fiction, to a wide variety of speculative futures. Many of them take us to the cyborg, yet they do not simply repeat Haraway’s influential figure. For Jilly Dreadful, the cyborg is one among a range of literary tropes that expands into a mode of storytelling; for Deanna Day, the cyborg should be left behind in favor of the critical lens of the zombie. Haraway herself, who is represented

by a reprinting of her acceptance speech for the Science Fiction Research Association's 2011 Pilgrim Award, shows the range of tropes that science fictions make available in addition to the cyborg. The cyborg is a figure who can obscure as well as reveal the importance of feminist analysis: Paula Gardner and Britt Wray show the ways in which gendered cyborg imagery hides the scientific reality of EEG devices' consumer usefulness in favor of making things 'cool,' while Barr's essay describes a science fiction world in which cyborgifying people become less human than inorganic yet affectively conscious robots. In the **cover image** (https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/ada_issue3_cover_gomoll.jpg), commissioned from renowned feminist science fiction illustrator Jeanne Gomoll, we see reality and fiction commingled: a cyborg figure slips out of the worlds of imagination, occupied by the persons and the dreams of the writers discussed in the issue, and makes her mark in a universe both new and familiar. Describing the image, Gomoll writes that the cyborg "is an element of an author's imagination, emerging into a fictional landscape on which the symbols from several novels are inscribed on the walls and a mythical beast threatens her next step and another galaxy is around the corner" (personal communication). Science fiction is a world of imagination, but it is also just around the corner, always and almost already here.

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Each contribution to this issue will be read and shared separately, garnering its own traffic and developing its own path thanks to *Ada's* commitment to open access scholarship. Nevertheless, to read them in order is to follow a path that may bring its own insights and pleasures. We begin with Moya Bailey's audio interview with Adrienne Maree Brown, "**Shaping God: The Power of Octavia Butler's Black Feminist and Womanist SciFi Visions in the Shaping of a New World.**"

(<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-baileybrown/>) Providing an introduction to science fiction's importance as a way for activists and theorists to collectively focus their speculative political imaginaries, the interview is placed so that you might listen while you contemplate the rest of the issue (**a written transcript is also available** (<https://adanewmedia.org/baileybrowntranscript/>)). Then Haran and King provide a speculative framework for the issue, and indeed for the work of *Ada*, Fembot, and its members as a whole, in their exploration of "**Science Fiction Feminisms, Feminist Science Fictions and Feminist Sustainability.**" (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-kingharan/>) Explicitly placing their work as part of the project in collaborative knowledge production that *Ada* undertakes, Haran and King foreground difference and dissent within their own

collaboration even as they lay out, with grace and coherence, exactly why the nexus of science and fiction is a zone to which all feminists ought now to be paying attention.

After these two lead pieces, we enter a cluster of works focusing on speculative depictions of reproduction and futurity. In **“Somatic Capitalism: Reproduction, Futurity, and Feminist Science Fiction,”** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-sheldon/>) Rebekah Sheldon works with Margaret Atwood’s 1986 and 2003 science fictions to theorize the importance of gendered, reproductive bodies to the emergence of what she calls “‘somatic capitalism’—the intervention into and monetization of life-itself.” The mechanics of biological reproduction are more directly engaged in Lucy Baker’s **“A Curious Doubled Existence: Birth Here and in Lois McMaster Bujold’s Vorkosigan Saga,”** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-baker/>) which analyzes a series popular among fans but rarely engaged by academics. Bujold’s work allows Baker to highlight the way that less-than-ostensibly-feminist science fiction can illustrate the significance of technology to everyday social decisions about domestic labor and personal autonomy. Offering a more negative take on science fictions of reproduction, Deanna Day’s **“Toward a Zombie Epistemology: What it Means to Live and Die in *Cabin in the Woods*”** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-day/>) draws from queer theorists’ critiques of the normative futures demanded by reproductive discourse in order to celebrate popular culture’s production of alternatives, which she reads in the zombie apocalypses heralded by Joss Whedon’s 2012 film.

Feminist critiques of transhumanist and singularity ideologies make up the next small cluster. Gardner and Wray engage the science fictions of the present in the form of discourses that surround technologies that look like they belong in a sci-fi movie but are in fact real: EEG devices that measure brainwaves and are marketed to consumers as means to control household technology and understand the brain. **“From Lab to Living Room: Transhumanist Imaginaries of Consumer Brain Wave Monitors”** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-gardnerwray/>) argues that the discourses surrounding such devices work more to obscure than to encourage neurological understanding. In a related critique of the transhuman whose focus is squarely on the fiction in science fiction, Marleen Barr’s **“Creating Room For A Singularity of Our Own: Reading Sue Lange’s *We, Robots*** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-barr/>)” brings Lange’s imaginary egg-shaped robot into the context of the speculative fictions of transhumanism and the singularity that are claimed as real by the likes of Ray Kurzweil.

We then move to a cluster of essays in which fictional speculation appears not only in content but also on the level of form. Clarissa Lee's **"Emmy Noether, Maria Goeppert Mayer, and their Cyborgian Counterparts: Triangulating Mathematical-Theoretical Physics, Feminist Science Studies, and Feminist Science Fiction"**

(<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-lee/>) takes advantage of the affordances of online publication to give readers a chance to choose their path through a groundbreaking essay whose creative innovations reward close and thoughtful reading. Lee merges a feminist theory of mathematical physics, biographies of two influential and underappreciated women physicists, and an exploration of her own decision to make the creation of science fiction part of her process as a critic and theorist into an extended analysis that can be read linearly or in modular sections as each appeals to the individual reader.

Lee's work is followed by another piece that demands and rewards intense readerly engagement: Jamie "Skye" Bianco's **"Queer Urban Composites: Any City or 'Bellona (After Samuel R. Delany)."** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-bianco/>) The "composite" of the title also describes the writing's palimpsest-like form, in which an argument builds gradually through visual examples and densely nuanced analyses. Bianco works with the convergence of science fiction and new media art in Ann Lislegaard's installation "Bellona (After Samuel R. Delany)" to argue that we should think of art not only as something to be explored in theory but as a way of doing "nondiscursive critique." Her speculative call is taken up in the two pieces that follow, in which Jilly Dreadful and Antoinette LaFarge and Annie Loui depict and explain their feminist science fiction new media art. Dreadful's **"The Cyborg in the Basement Manifesto, or, A Frankenstein of One's Own: How I Stopped Hunting for Cyborgs and Created the Slightly Irregular Definition of Cyborean Forms of Storytelling"** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-dreadful/>) and LaFarge and Loui's **"Excerpts from *Reading Frankenstein: Mary Shelley As 21st Century Artificial Life Scientist*"** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-lafargeloui/>) need least introduction, as each explains the conditions of its own creation within the text. Both bring the literary and cultural canon of feminist science fiction into the context of contemporary new media art and performance, merging the often-incommensurate worlds of critique and creation, theory and practice.

The issue closes with a return to Donna Haraway, allusions to whose work spiral through every contribution. In a format fitting to the collaborative focus of *Fembot* and *Ada*, I invited Roxanne Samer, Alexandrina Agloro, and Laurie Carlson to review Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick's new book on Haraway, and their conversation

is transcribed in their **“Beyond the Cyborg Collective Book Review.”**

(<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-sameretal/>) Their review includes a bibliography of additional sources relevant to Haraway’s work, especially in the field of women of color feminism.

Finally, Haraway’s 2011 speech brings us home to the convergence of science fiction and social reality in which we live every day. Her **“SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far”** (<https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-haraway/>) uses weaving as a metaphor to dance us through the nexus of feminism, technology, and media. In Haraway’s speech and in each of the new works published here, we have new threads for the already rich and complex fabric of science fiction feminisms’ exploration of gender, media, and technology.

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The essays in this issue have passed through two rounds of intensive review, their authors strengthening their work with extensive revisions, in a time scale far shorter than the years it can often take for scholarship to move from submission to publication. We have the Fembot collective’s own contribution to the futures of feminist science fiction social realities to thank for this intellectual generosity and high-speed rigor. This was the second issue of *Ada* to follow a collective, open review process whose details are still being hammered out. (Bailey’s audio interview, Samer, Agloro and Carlson’s conversational review, and Haraway’s republished speech passed through only one round of editorial review.) As always in any editorial process and in any feminist collective, there were moments of conflict and anxiety, but the experience of working with each author and with the collective reviewers who gave their time has been amazingly rewarding. Academic life often feels competitive and lonely, but Fembot feels more like feminist science fiction fandom—intellectual labor built on love and shared excitement.

Thanks beyond measure are due to the reviewers who stepped up to participate in this collective process: Aimee Bahng, Kristina Busse, Gerry Canavan, Anne Cong-Huyen, Karen Estlund, Conseula Francis, Alice Gambrell, Andrea Hairston, Nalo Hopkinson, Andrea Horbinski, Nina Huntemann, Chera Kee, Regina Yung Lee, Margherita Long, Rebecca Onion, Kathleen O’Riordan, Amanda Phillips, Suzanne Scott, Shelley Streeby, and Sherryl Vint. In addition to reviewing, Carol Stabile and Radhika Gajjala provided tireless editorial support and many hours of copyediting, while the behind-the-scenes

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Gender, New Media, and Technology on feminist science fiction. More about her work can be found at queergeektheory.org.

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