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THE JOY OF QUEER SCIENCE FICTION READING, OR: WILL QUEERS DESTROY SCIENCE FICTION?

Abstract: The paper seeks to examine the connections between “queer reading” and “science fiction reading” from the perspective of readers’ recollections of their juvenile experiences of “looking for clues” in queer sf narratives. Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading, I discuss the idea of queer adolescent reading as a possibly transformative experience that offers exciting theoretical opportunities for academic scholarship on the fantastic. By turning attention to selected testaments of adolescent queer readerly experiences, written by both writers and fans, I hope to demonstrate both the personal (individual) and collective nature of queer self-recognition through these intense and affective engagements with sf texts. A closer examination of a collection of short essays in which authors reflect on the provocative idea of “queers destroying sf,” also based on individual recollections of engaging with sf as young readers, expands the discussion to incorporate fan activity and the question of queer canon-forming.

Keywords: queer science fiction, reading, representation, adolescence, canon

Introduction

José Esteban Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia* with a powerful political declaration that “the future is queerness’ domain. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”¹ This view of queer futurity as both an aesthetic and a political objective is a rejection of the anti-social turn in queer studies initiated by Leo Bersani and later advanced by Lee Edelman,² who criticized the uselessness of most future-oriented deployments of queerness in both theory and political praxis. Muñoz, while aware

¹ J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, New York University Press, New York 2009, p. 1.

² L. Bersani, *Homos*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1996; L. Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 2004.

that his political idealism will be dismissed by many queer theorists, nevertheless unabashedly embraced what he viewed as a modality of queer utopianism, influenced by the writings of German philosopher Ernst Bloch, most significantly the recognition of the anticipatory illumination of art. For Muñoz, queerness is equated with an ungraspable, unquenchable thirst for “something that is not yet here,” but can and must be imagined as a possible world looming on the horizon: “The not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present.”³ His insistence on letting queer theory “daydream” about a better future was set against what he calls the “pragmatic gay agenda,” in short, the mainstream assimilationist LGBTQ political movement, but can be equally useful to consider in relation to queer narratives in popular culture.

Whereas the author of *Cruising Utopia* channels this framework of queer utopian futurity to examine visual art, performance, utopian spaces and grassroots disruptive political acts, I want to apply it to a seemingly less spectacular site of future-oriented speculation – science fiction. Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading, I discuss the idea of queer adolescent reading as a possibly transformative experience that offers exciting theoretical opportunities for academic scholarship on the fantastic. By turning attention to selected testaments of adolescent queer readerly experiences, written by both writers and fans, I hope to demonstrate both the personal (individual) and collective nature of queer self-recognition through these intense and affective engagements with sf texts – or, in other words, to illustrate the hopeful utopian horizon that can be located within the sf imagination.

Reparative Reading and Queer Perpetual Adolescence

In her review of *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, a volume of essays edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,⁴ sf scholar Ann Weinstone convincingly argues for the need to appropriate the different strategies of queer reading posited in the anthology in order to broaden, or indeed to salvage, modern academic scholarship on science fiction literature. Her argument on *queer reading* can be developed alongside the theoretical framework on *science fiction reading* most skillfully described by Tom Shippey, who turned critical attention to the process of reading speculative fiction viewed as a specific mode of engaging with a written text.⁵ My interest lies precisely in the intersection between these two reading protocols, in what I propose to consider

³ J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁴ E.K. Sedgwick, *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You* [in:] eadem (ed.), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham–London 1997.

⁵ T. Shippey, *Preface: Learning to Read Science Fiction* [in:] eadem (ed.), *Fictional Space: Essays on Contemporary Science Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991.

as a model of queer sf reading that takes into account the future-oriented (utopian) perspective of both the sf genre and the queer reader.

In her introduction to *Novel Gazing...*, Sedgwick compared two distinct and oppositional modes of how to approach a queer reading of literary texts. The first is a product of what Paul Ricoeur characterized as the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a paradigm underlying most of early queer deconstructions of cultural texts – the paranoid reading. Its intention is to reveal the oppressive structures underlying almost every aspect of societal arrangements and discourses. To continually engage in a paranoid habit of interpreting culture is to understand that only by exposing these hidden, normalizing power structures can we begin to work towards establishing a more liberated future. While Sedgwick acknowledges that “in a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious, or complaisant,”⁶ she nonetheless proposes a contradictory strategy – that of reparative reading. It is a proposition to embrace positivity, even in spite of the fact that paranoid interpretative strategies ultimately bring important knowledge that cannot be ignored (and thus a paranoid reading remains a productive, “strong theory”). What she calls reparative reading, or “a seeking of pleasure,” on the other hand, looks for hope in even the most unexpected textual spaces. Contrary to paranoid reading’s anticipatory stance, reparative reading offers a chance for the reader to be surprised in various ways, since “there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-object she encounters or creates.”⁷

Weinstone’s review of Sedgwick’s anthology is appropriately titled “Science Fiction as a Young Person’s First Queer Theory,” as it indeed uses *Novel Gazing* as pretext for a much more radical intervention into the field of science fiction studies, as she proceeds to formulate a pleasure-oriented positive strategy for queering the act of reading sf:

This enaction of transformative magic through reading, this hope for reading, for the reader, must, I feel it (oh!), reach back to a moment in queer adolescence when – locked in that sexually/perceptually strange, peterpanoptic zone, having been sure that you were condemned to live alone among perpetual adults of perpetual resignation – a companion appears, a companion world, a small opening, the incredible relief, one sinks into it, abandoned, delirious, electrified.⁸

Weinstone offers an intriguing way in which two presumably separate modes of readerly practice can be reinforced through the act of locating the reader’s experience in a “peterpanoptic zone,” an imaginative queer space she perceives as characteristic

⁶ E.K. Sedgwick, *Paranoid Reading...*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 24.

⁸ A. Weinstone, *Science Fiction as a Young Person’s First Queer Theory*, “Science Fiction Studies” 1999, vol. 26 (1), p. 43.

for “queer (perpetual) adolescence.”⁹ In some ways, Weinstone seems to be anticipating Jack Halberstam’s later theorization of a specifically nonlinear queer temporality, in which one’s “immaturity” is a break also from Edelman’s reproductive futurism, as it replaces the figure of the future Child with an embracing of the overall lack of “respectability” and “stability” brought on by the perpetually-adolescent queer subject who remains liberated from the normalizing structures of linear “straight time.”¹⁰ Interestingly, Weinstone’s postulate for a new understanding of what I propose to call “queer sf reading” situates itself against the well-established academic investment in theories which bring out the “seriousness” of sf narratives as a literature of cognitive estrangement, a definition advanced by influential Marxist-oriented scholars such as Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and Carl Freedman.¹¹ In that context, I read Weinstone’s remarks as an invitation to move beyond viewing the object of (queer) science fiction as merely extrapolative “thought experiments” on diverse gender and sexual speculations. Building on queer studies’ penchant for sidestepping normative and “omnipressively boring” interpretations, Weinstone challenges this legacy of making “sf do the hard work of political instruction, to make sf *useful*,”¹² instead opting for a positive re-assessment of the delinquency of adolescent reading.¹³ Importantly, her argument relies heavily on personal experience, as she goes on to describe her own vivid memories of encountering queerness in sf stories ferociously consumed as a young reader. She offers an evocative recapitulation of the ways in which her proposed re-evaluation of these adolescent reading experiences can provide important insights into our understanding of the sf genre as such:

Wonderful particularly because of what they suggest to us writers of sf criticism and theory about opening up *our* readings to the scene of our adolescent encounters with sf, those deliciously alienated, titillatingly estranged, damp, forgetful, delinquent, tongue-fuzzing yearnings for transfiguration that precipitate, as much as any world-reconstructing cogitations, visceral,

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ J.J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, New York University Press, New York–London 2005.

¹¹ D. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Yale University Press, New Haven, MA 1979; F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London 2005; C. Freedman, *Science Fiction and Critical Theory*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 2000.

¹² A. Weinstone, *Science Fiction as a Young Person’s First Queer Theory*, op. cit., p. 42.

¹³ Writing about recent queer science fiction cinema, Agnieszka Kotwasińska and Anna Kurowicka also note that, “Rather than discussing pleasure directly, sf researchers often turn to wonder, enchantment, the sublime, the spectacle, and inevitably, Darko Suvin’s notion of cognitive estrangement,” and their proposed framework oriented around what they call “a somewhat disputable kind of queer pleasure” aligns with my focus on re-evaluating queer canon-forming practice among queer fans. See: A. Kotwasińska, A. Kurowicka, *Readings in Queer Pleasure: Jupiter Ascending Revisited*, “Science Fiction Film and Television” 2024, vol. 17 (1), pp. 105–127.

and in some respect pleasing, after-experiences of the simple *oddness* that our world should be arranged just so, that it should be so stubbornly and statically *arranged*.¹⁴

In an earlier passage Weinstone juxtaposes the type of sf worldbuilding preferred by the most sf critics and scholars, first and foremost Tom Moylan's critical utopias and dystopias positioned as "useful" for political readings of the genre,¹⁵ with what she calls "an otherworld [...] a delinquent sibling" of these progressive "thought experiments," by and large a way of positively reevaluating "the oh-so-queer and excessively wasteful scene of sf *reading*" as a "strong theory."¹⁶ In other words, her commitment is to the *pleasure* of reading sf narratives, the joy in finding oneself immersed in an imaginative world that disrupts the normative flows of society and culture, and of experiencing the fearful-and-fascinating sense of strangeness and alienation. However, is it possible to apply these adolescent experiences of engaging with the fantastic to a theoretical frame that would allow for a critical analysis of queer sf texts?

One possible way of answering this question requires an examination of readers' testaments of how they remember their initial, adolescent interactions with sf literature. Indeed, it can be argued that the entire strategy of "queering science fiction," regardless of various important academic interventions,¹⁷ is essentially a practice shared by fans of the fantastic: readers, viewers, critics, co-creators, a plethora of aficionados belonging to different "communities of practice whose desires for the genre are distinct."¹⁸ Among these sought-for "readerly" desires and pleasures one seems to be of particular significance for queer readers: self-recognition *in* sf narratives and *through* the act of reading sf. What follows is an attempt to apply these "delinquent" and "immature" reading perspectives to an examination of readers' own past narratives about searching for a queer future in sf stories.

¹⁴ A. Weinstone, *Science Fiction as a Young Person's First Queer Theory*, op. cit., p. 46 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ T. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Westview Press, Boulder 2000.

¹⁶ A. Weinstone, *Science Fiction as a Young Person's First Queer Theory*, op. cit., p. 43.

¹⁷ For more on queer science fiction scholarship, see: A. Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*, New York University Press, New York 2018; A. Lothian, *Feminist and Queer Science Fiction in America* [in:] E.C. Link, G. Canavan (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015; W. Pearson, V. Hollinger, J. Gordon (eds.), *Queer Universes: Sexualities and Science Fiction*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2008; P. Melzer, *Alien Construction: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2006.

¹⁸ S. Vint, *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury, London–New York 2014, p. 93.

Queer Science Fiction Reading

Testimonies of queer-identifying readers acknowledging the significance of their juvenile experiences of reading sf as one of the introductory steps in the process of self-recognition exemplify the subversive potential of pop culture in shaping identity. It also significantly moves critical attention from considering how non-normative representations affect heteronormative society in general – in scholarship “constructed around the assumption that once people know better, they will change their views”¹⁹ – to examining its reception among queer readers. Richard Labonté, a Canadian writer and co-editor of multiple LGBTQ-themed anthologies, including the 2006 short-story collection *The Future Is Queer*, provides an interesting narrative about the joyous act of adolescent queer reading. In his introduction to the volume he co-edited with Lawrence Schimel, Labonté reminisces on his childhood formative years, in a characteristically sentimental manner interweaving memories of his first romantic infatuations with a growing admiration for sf literature. He concludes:

But the library was where I fell in love. With Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, Jack Williamson, A.E. van Vogt, Murray Leinster, E.E. “Doc” Smith, Manly Wade Wellman, and Jack Vance, among many – a universe of imaginations conjuring a wealth of universes. Endless great escape. This was in 1960, and it was the first time, but not the last, that I lost myself in a room full of books. [...] So there I was, practicing fag by the time I was twelve, and reading four or five science fiction books a week. My future was certainly going to be queer.²⁰

In the case of the connection Labonté establishes between self-recognition through socialization (“practicing fag by the time I was twelve”) and through cultural practices (“reading four or five science fiction books a week”), it would naturally seem useful to reframe self-recognition as a temporal, ongoing process, rather than some specific point in time that can be identified with precision. Indeed, while the process of identity-forming is dynamic and never completed, one’s childhood and adolescent years may be perceived as a period of exceptional transgressive potential. And as both his and Weinstone’s recollections seem to suggest, it was science fiction specifically which had considerable allure for their adolescent selves.

In the essay “Looking for Clues,”²¹ Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson offers yet another account of an experience of adolescent queer readings, and the joys of finding traces of another world in speculative fiction:

¹⁹ T. Peele, *Introduction* [in:] eadem (ed.), *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007, p. 2.

²⁰ R. Labonté, *Introduction: My Love Affair with Queer Boys, Gay Lit, and Science Fiction* [in:] R. Labonté, L. Schimel (eds.), *The Future Is Queer: A Science Fiction Anthology*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver 2006, pp. 10–11.

²¹ Hopkinson’s essay is based on her guest of honor speech presented in 2002 at WisCon, the feminist science fiction convention taking place annually in Madison, Wisconsin.

I suspect we've all done this, in one way or another; gone digging through the images of appropriate personhood with which we're presented – images which often exclude us completely, and looked for clues that yes, people like us do in fact exist, and can in fact be seen as valuable, strong, sexy, beautiful. [...] There must be more freaky people who find blue lipstick more interesting than the ubiquitous shades of red, who find sexy Annie Lennox even sexier when she's in Elvis drag, and the cave troll more appealing than the exiled prince. [...] It was probably pretty inevitable that I would find the science fiction and fantasy shelves in the adult section of public library where my mother worked. [...] I was still fascinated by tales of the unreal and the impossible. Mostly it was that they were so different from the life I was leading, and with which I was too familiar. So yes, it was escapism, that damning word.²²

Hopkinson's gripping retelling of her childhood quests for identity touches upon a number of issues which I find characteristic of the wider process of incorporating the queer into sf. In her memory, the hunger for finding some kind of representation is also framed as a story of searching for connections, possible queer networks and alliances. These are founded on a shared experience of minoritarian identification, of feeling invisible to society, as well as a sense of queer taste and desire forming alongside pop-cultural explorations. In Hopkinson's narrative, the sf genre appears as a natural next step in a story of self-recognition through expressions in culture. In the latter part of the essay, the author of *Midnight Robber* reminisces on some of the most memorable books she found in the "adult" section of the bookstore, mostly comic books and sf and fantasy stories "that introduced me to concepts that had never occurred to me before, and that sure as hell weren't taught in school."²³ This almost educational role played by speculative fiction ferociously consumed as a young reader also posits that "looking for clues" in fantastic narratives should lead not only to a sense of self-discovery, but also to a community of like-minded readers.

Importantly, Hopkinson directly ties her adolescent readerly searches in the imaginative (but also literal) "pop" library with matters of race, noting the significance of discovering on the back cover of another queer-decoded book the photograph of its author:

There was a photograph of Chip; the first I'd ever seen. [...] I had missed all the clues. Samuel R. Delany was a black man; the first black man I'd ever been aware of in this field. I stared and stared at the picture, incredulously, and then I began to cry. [...] I kept asking myself, but why is it so important that he's black? It doesn't make any difference, does it? Race doesn't matter, does it? I'd been taught that it didn't, no more than class, gender, physical ability, age, or sexuality did. [...] And yet [...] it was a clue that I couldn't ignore, even if at the time I couldn't quite figure out the answer to why differences amongst people both did and didn't matter.²⁴

These types of discoveries can be seen as characteristic for engaged adolescent reading practices of speculative fictions, possessing deep significance for the nar-

²² N. Hopkinson, *Looking For Clues* [in:] K.J. Fowler, P. Murphy, D. Notkin, J.D. Smith (eds.), *The James Tiptree Award Anthology 2*, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco 2006, pp. 113–115.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 116–117.

ratives of shaping a person’s queer subjectivity. Consider Delany’s own account of a similar revelation – his captivating discovery, as a young reader, of the blackness of Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* protagonist Johnny Rico. An otherwise unessential plot detail is nonetheless transformed into a memory of “a knowledge that I have experienced a world in which the placement of the information about the narrator’s face is proof that in such a world much of the race problem, at least, has disappeared. The book as text [...] became, for a moment, the symbol of that world.”²⁵

What these written testimonies describe is the creation of an individual imaginative space where boundaries and limitations posed on race, gender and sexuality can be explored and challenged, in each case stemming from a discovery of sf’s imaginative reservoir of “otherworlds.” In both Labonté’s and Hopkinson’s essays the memories connected with adolescent queer reading of sf are retroactively presented as major milestones on the path to forming one’s queer identity – based also in part on locating a private archive of queer sf stories. In order to include another perspective than that of professional writers and fans, in the final section of this article I focus on the queer adolescent reading practices among the sf fandom, focusing on a close analysis of a provocative publication – a special issue of “*Lightspeed Magazine*” titled “Queers Destroy Science Fiction!”

Will Queers Destroy Science Fiction?

The larger “Destroy” project was initiated by the online monthly “*Lightspeed Magazine*,” published since 2010 by editor and owner John Joseph Adams. Appearing both in electronic and traditional paper form, it became known among the sf community for its fan-funded special issues. The first, entitled “*Women Destroy Science Fiction!*,” appeared in 2013, together with two accompanying volumes dedicated to horror (“*Nightmare Magazine*”) and fantasy (“*Fantasy Magazine*”).

In 2015, a similar crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter made it possible to continue the initiative of producing special guest-edited issues, this time, however, aimed specifically at the queer fandom. The campaign was ultimately supported by 2,250 individual “backers” who donated enough money that the magazine was once again divided into three separate volumes. What follows is an analysis of the central volume of the entire project – “*Lightspeed*” issue 61 (June 2015), titled “*Queers Destroy Science Fiction!*,” guest edited by American writer Seanan McGuire (assisted by four co-editors). The more-than four hundred pages long special issue is filled with different genres of writing: original short fiction, flash fiction, reprints of older stories by the more renowned writers (e.g. Geoff Ryman, Rand B. Lee, Nalo Hopkinson), followed by short interviews with the authors of published pieces, a queer art gallery,

²⁵ S.R. Delany, *Shadows* [in:] eadem, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Dragon, New York 1977, pp. 94–95.

a small section presenting reviews of books and, finally – a large number of personal essays examining the special issues’ theme of “queers destroying sf.”

All in all, “Queers Destroy Science Fiction!” serves as a guidebook presenting the creatively rich subcultural production of queer-identified science fiction aficionados – both professional and amateur. Because of the collective nature of the entire “Destroy” project, in which fans contribute to publications both financially and creatively, the special issue of “Lightspeed” provides an interesting case study of the rich and diverse fan practices of queer-identifying members of the American sf fandom, who defiantly oppose the absence of queer representation in mainstream sf publishing.

The issue opens with a manifesto authored by the five guest editors. Titled “The Queers Destroy Science Fiction! Manifesto,” the piece is based on two key concepts: invisibility and change. Sharing their personal life experiences of being life-long readers and creators of sf, as well as people identifying on the queer spectrum, the editors call upon the genre to end its tradition of sentencing non-normative sexualities to remain unseen: ignored or rendered invisible. Reflecting on their own readerly experiences, they address sf’s failure to accommodate sexual difference: “[...] if I read a book that was full of people who loved each other, whose love I could see in the space between the sentences, I would be told that some of the love I saw didn’t exist.”²⁶ As a manifesto demanding a transformation of the sf genre, it is quite naturally oriented towards the future as much as it invites retroactive reconsiderations of the past; indeed, the special issue is posited as a step forward, an agent of change for recognizing queer existence throughout history:

We have always been here, from the beginning, and our tales, our songs, our verses comforted the ones that felt different from the rest. Gay and lesbian culture as we know it, gender dysphoria, and the rest of the complicated spectrum of sexual and gender identity may be postmodern constructs, but there have always been men who loved men and women who loved women and folks who felt suppressed by what society told them to wear and act because of what was found between their legs.²⁷

The manifesto calls for queer visibility in popular fiction, focusing almost solely on the representation of non-normative characters in sf stories. Noting that in recent years the number of these representations is steadily growing, the authors criticize what they view as the still limited range of expressions and types of queer characters: “No matter the role we play in these stories, our purpose tends to be singular. Our participation limited. Our meaning muted.”²⁸ Addressing the supposedly controversial title of the entire project, the authors of the manifesto self-consciously disarm its radical potential by noting that the genre obviously cannot be destroyed. In fact,

²⁶ QDSF Editorial Team, *The Queers Destroy Science Fiction! Manifesto*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

the aim of their intervention is to protest against biases that “limit the future”: “We can so narrowly, so tightly map the possible that we wall ourselves into a cave of our own making. And we queers, we can and will and must destroy that narrowness of scope.”²⁹ Essentially, their aim is to contradict historical tendencies for unifying the sf field, and replace it with a more inclusive publishing agenda that would cater to different tastes. This task of destroying “sameness,” of creatively opposing the homogeneity of sf imagery, is rendered as a force of positive change. As their text emphasizes ever so strongly, the destructive capacity of its proclaimed queer intervention is guided by what Weinstone considered the very nature of queer sf reading – the pleasure of disrupting the normative flows of society and culture; or, in the words of the editors: “When we destroy science fiction, we must do so with joy and glee.”³⁰

The message sketched out in the opening manifesto is continued, broadened, and oftentimes complicated in the selection of personal essays and interviews that follows. Reconstructing the essence of what these queer fans consider as the issue’s primary objective sheds light on several issues concerning the practice of queering sf, and its relation to identity politics. There is a visible difference between the political project of reclaiming queer agency in sf literature demarcated by the authors of “The Queers Destroy Science Fiction! Manifesto,” and the multiple points of view on how to actually approach it presented by other contributors. In that sense, the special issue on queer diversity is far off from being a structured unitary representation of what “queer science fiction” actually amounts to. On the contrary, the inherently discursive character of the entire “Destroy” project is rooted in community-building and the idea of negotiating a shared past, present, and hopefully also a (near-)future. Interestingly, the essays are built primarily around authors’ recollections of their adolescent reading experiences – “searching for clues” about queerness in canonical works of American sf.

A recurring question addressed in almost every piece in the magazine is that of the history of queer and LGBT representation. In a way, the contributors attempt to recover a queer archive of speculative fiction, albeit a personal one, existing first and foremost in their memories of enjoying science fiction as young readers. What they remember about their adolescent reading experiences is often framed as a quest for self-recognition, a search for representations of otherness among the dominating “straight worlds.” The invisibility of non-normative gender and sexuality is compared to an absence of vocabulary that allows for accurate self-description, despite the seemingly progressive, future-oriented nature of the genre. Lee Thomas, a Lambda Award-winning writer, compared this significant absence to the notion of Newspeak borrowed from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in which the British author imagined a state-controlled and highly-restrictive language that severely limits self-expression. Looking for queer representations, then, becomes syn-

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

onymous with a “thoughtcrime,” and the limited vocabulary present on the pages only reinforces discrimination. Ultimately, the author argues, the absence of language is a constraint for self-recognition: “If you have one word for the LGBTQ community and that word is deviant, you are successfully limiting the ways people think about this group.”³¹

For some, reminiscing on their adolescent memories leads to confession about their first science-fictional crushes: “It [sf] gave me Lando Calrissian in that sweeping cape, and it gave a lonely brown queer a spark of desire, enough to keep him alive so that he could one day ignite the world.”³² Queer representation in popular fiction is important not only because it opens up a space for self-reflection on one’s identity – the joyful experience of adolescent queer reading is also an experience of encountering a first expression of queer desire, e.g. in relation to a fictional character whose sexual ambiguity sparks curious interest, a type of queer relationality also acknowledged by Muñoz: “the desire for an alien who looks like an alien, who is odd and freakish, and reflects my own freakishness back at me.”³³

In the view of the authors of the essays, exposing (and then filling out) the absence of queer representation is the primary role not only of sf, but popular literature in general. As one writer explains, referencing their own struggle to define as asexual, “[p]eople are hardwired to respond to narratives. If I’d have stories that showed people opting out of sex, I would have been a much less bitter teen.”³⁴ Therefore, the authors’ insistence on “destroying” sf is founded on a hope that it will help future generations in their quests for self-discovery, which, as author Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam emphasizes, requires a “mainstreaming” of queer sf, since for now “these stories are few and far-between and required seeking-out. Some people are not so lucky to uncover them.”³⁵

Interestingly, the emphasis on queer representation at times seems to contradict other approaches to exploring issues of non-normative sexuality pursued by some writers. Jill Seidenstein’s essay stands in contrast with other entries, as it renounces the tradition of science-fictional “thought experiments” viewed as an unsatisfying:

My mind bent in delicious ways as I worked to understand Le Guin’s agendered people in *Winter*. [...] I looked within science fiction to explore this facet of myself, but I don’t recall finding anything that connected with my queer identity. I drew the conclusion queerness was a separate universe from the world of SF, despite Le Guin’s story. [...] Nowhere that I looked did I see

³¹ L. Thomas, *1984 in 1980*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 352.

³² M. Oshiro, *Spark*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 359.

³³ J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, op. cit., p. 130.

³⁴ A. Owomoyela, *How Queer Narratives Beat the False-Consensus Effect, Reminded Me That Diversity Existed, Exploited Human Psychology, Inspired Sex Positivity, and Helped Me Stop Worrying (But Not To Love the Bomb)*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 356.

³⁵ B.J. Stufflebeam, *A World of Queer Imagination*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 400.

a representation that contained the entirety of me. There were no mirrors, no reflections, only absence.³⁶

The author's argument once again returns to the absence of identity-oriented depictions of queer subjectivities in the canon of sf literature. Instead, she writes, writers too often merely extrapolate handpicked aspects of gender and sexuality, thus presenting fragmentary glimpses of radical alterity, or merely imaginative social constructions of sexual difference, which she does not consider "mirrors" or "reflections" of her own life experiences. However, it is important to note that these fan reflections on the queer canon-forming processes should be considered within the broader history of the genre's subversive traditions predating openly queer interventions – feminist and postcolonial sf. Particularly the latter tradition must be acknowledged for its impact on mainstream sf publishing since at least the 1960s, as feminist sf writing was "arguably as much about questioning gender roles as homosexuality,"³⁷ similarly as is the important role of radical "thought experiments" on gender and sexuality proposed by such figures as Le Guin, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr., Octavia Butler, to name a few.³⁸

Much of the critical attention of the contributors to the special issue focuses on a queer re-evaluation of the historical canon of science fiction. Authors recount their experiences of becoming exposed to narratives that surprised them with either their sexually-explicit subject matter, or their author's liberal stance towards gender variation, non-normative sexuality, alternative kinship etc. Several essays in particular interrogate the works of Robert Heinlein, with authors noting how the writer was able to conjure up non-traditional forms of marriage in *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), even despite the otherwise off-putting "endless hetfest, pages and pages of straight people sex."³⁹ Filmmaker Amber Neko Meador devotes an entire piece, aptly titled "Queers in a Strange Land," to Heinlein's fiction, discussing his influential portrayal of queer characters and themes in such novels as *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) and *Time Enough For Love* (1973). Not shying away from critiquing the American writer's inconsistencies in addressing non-normative sexualities and alternative kinship arrangements, Meador nonetheless presents an interesting case for accepting Heinlein into the ephemeral queer canon, basing their argument on personal experience; regardless of later, more critical revisions of the writer's political and ideological positions, at least his early fiction remains "a mixed bag of acceptance and

³⁶ J. Seidenstein, *All That Glitters*, "Lightspeed" 2015, vol. 61, p. 365.

³⁷ A.M. Butler, *Solar Flares: Science Fiction in the 1970s*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2012, p. 154.

³⁸ For more on the subversive role of feminist sf in the genre's history, see: J. Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 2002; H. Merrick, *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms*, Aqueduct Press, Seattle 2009; L. Yaszek, *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2008.

³⁹ E. Maroon, *The Books That Read Me*, "Lightspeed" 2015, vol. 61, p. 395.

understanding of queer characters.”⁴⁰ It also demonstrates that the practice of canon-forming attempted by queer readers can often directly contradict statements about the genre’s failure to address queerness, as the adolescent joyful engagement with sf narratives can in some ways “salvage” even those works of fiction which would otherwise alienate other readers.

Among writers most frequently mentioned as central to the queer canon are Vonda McIntyre, Octavia Butler, and Catherynne M. Valente. A handful of contributors refer to Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1975) as perhaps the most important “overtly queer” American sf novel, despite its demanding prose and complex structure: “I struggled through *Dhalgren* like I was trying to understand a boa constrictor that was in the process of destroying me, fascinated and frightened and committed to the outcome.”⁴¹ Jerome Stueart acknowledges Delany’s unique status as a writer who for many years was a one-person representative of the elusive “gay sf”: “He was the one author people would suggest to you when you came out to them as both gay and a science fiction lover.”⁴² In his essay submitted to the special issue, Scottish author Hal Duncan offers his own definition of what role queer sf can serve for young queer readers; juxtaposing it with the usual accusation of providing escapism, the New Weird writer calls it “rescuism”: “Utopias, dystopias, and heterotopias exploring the capacities of cultures for glorious deviance from the normative. [...] This fiction of the strange is by definition that of the queer.”⁴³ For the adolescent reader, the author responsible for most of these “gloriously deviant” narratives was Delany: “[...] who really rescued me from the shit of small time queerness [...] those spacers came down in my imagination, and I saw their future – a potential home for me: New Sodom. And went up.”⁴⁴

The authors of the essays remain divided as to the strategy that a further queering of speculative fiction would require – whether to continue promoting a “mainstreaming” of queer sf (e.g. among big publishing houses), or to focus on their niche spaces and community-building. Editor and publisher Michael Damian Thomas acknowledges that the idea behind the “Queers Destroy SF” issue might ultimately be counterproductive, as “some will claim that an issue just focusing on QUILTBAG authors will further ‘ghettoize’ these pieces and creators.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the constant referencing of the inclusive acronym⁴⁶ is one of the most pronounced defining traits of the entire political discussion taking place in the “QDSF!” special issue, as the authors’ oft-declared call for intersectionality still remains paradoxically organized around distinct

⁴⁰ A.M. Meador, *Queers in a Strange Land*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 342.

⁴¹ E. Maroon, *The Books That Read Me*, op. cit., p. 396.

⁴² J. Stueart, *When We’re Not There, We’re Not Here*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 368.

⁴³ H. Duncan, *Where Now Must I Go To Make a Home?*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 383.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ M.D. Thomas, *Queers Digging and Destroying*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 404.

⁴⁶ The QUILTBAG acronym stands for: queer/questioning, undecided, intersex, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, gay/genderqueer.

identity categories, and thus what is envisioned as a queer act of resistance to labeling at the same time seems to reinforce the fragmentation of queer politics.

Conclusion

As I sought to demonstrate in my examination of readers' memories of their adolescent reading experiences, the notion of queer science fiction reading can potentially be used as a critical tool for both studies of canon-forming practices in the genre as well as the subcultural practices of fans. Following Sedgwick's conceptualization of reparative reading, I sought to show how embracing the unexpected joys of reading sf queerly can be aligned with Muñoz' insistence that the modality of queer utopianism is oriented towards the future – that queerness is never stable or fixed, but always anticipatory – and is also expressed e.g. by “Destroy” contributors' belief in a future of the genre that will be more inclusive, strange, freakish, estranged, radical. In that sense, the idea that sf must be destroyed – in itself a narrative haunting sf criticism since its inception⁴⁷ – is structured around a hope of transformation, and presented as an act of resistance, indeed – a queer act of joyous vandalism: “When we say *destroy science fiction*, we mean *let's make it like something you've never seen before*. Which is, if you think about it, the *whole point* of science fiction.”⁴⁸

It seems particularly striking that a focus on the readerly pleasures of engaging with science fiction narratives is so often recalled as a memory of childhood and adolescent experiences. Perhaps adopting a critical framework of queer science fiction reading offers a chance to counter much of academic scholarship's “performative seriousness”⁴⁹ in relation to analyzing popular genres such as sf and fantasy, and instead privilege a study of affective responses to speculative texts. In the end, it is an invitation to return to the scene of reading, accepting perhaps the state of queer perpetual adolescence as a productive position from which to look across the fantastic in search of queer pleasures and desires in other worlds and in other times.

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⁴⁷ In a now-classic essay in science fiction studies, Roger Luckhurst noted the prevalence of narratives ritually announcing the death of sf, and its re-birth in a new and better form (e.g. cyberpunk). In that sense, the “Destroy” project seems to fit a broader tendency present in the history of sf. See: R. Luckhurst, *The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic*, “Science Fiction Studies” 1994, vol. 21 (1), pp. 35–50.

⁴⁸ L.N. Morton, *Creative Destruction*, “Lightspeed” 2015, vol. 61, p. 390.

⁴⁹ A. Weinstone, *Science Fiction as a Young Person's First Queer Theory*, op. cit., p. 42.

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