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### Something New Under The Sun: Episode 4

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## Something New Under the Sun: Episode 4

### Episode 4: The New! The Now! The Fantastic!: Artistic and Scholarly Innovation

Deletion / April 7, 2014



*Deletion is proud to present Episode 4 The New! The Now! The Fantastic!: Artistic and Scholarly Innovation, specially helmed by Marleen S. Barr, noted for her foundational work in feminist science fiction criticism. This episode has a particular thematic focus on women's creative practice intersecting with the science fictional, the authorial and the scholarly.*

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It was a dark and stormy night. Be that as it may, *The New! The Now! The Fantastic!: Artistic and Scholarly Innovation* presents something new under the sun. That night's weather was nothing like the sun, though. Snow was general all over the State University of New York at Buffalo's campus. I refer to the infamous 'Blizzard of '77' which caused Buffalo to be declared a national snow emergency disaster area. Snow buried parked cars. People suffered from cabin fever. Civilization stopped. But graduate student moi was well prepared. I had a survival kit. Armed with one container of plain Dannon yogurt (non-fat) and my copy of Ursula Le Guin's first novel *Rocannon's World*, I ate the yogurt, read, and hoped for the best.

The best is exactly what I closely encountered. While finishing the novel and the yogurt, I became enthralled with Le Guin; I forgot to worry about starving to death. As soon as life returned to normal – instead of hightailing it to the reopened-at-last grocery store – I went straight to Samuel Clemens Hall. I was anxious to tell my teachers Leslie Fiedler and Norman N. Holland about the superb new author named Ursula Le Guin.

I would like to think that I barged into their offices and articulated some 1977 twenty-something version of “O.M.G.! Ursula Le Guin is totally awesome!” But no such equivalent language existed. I very boringly said this to Leslie and Norm: “Ursula Le Guin is good.” These titans of literary criticism, two of the most liberal and innovative scholars of the second half of the twentieth century, were certainly open to agreeing with a young graduate student’s new notion that a female science fiction author could absolutely have the right writerly stuff. Leslie nodded his head affirmatively, puffed on his cigar, and described his science fiction scholarship forays. I convinced Norm to the extent that he contributed a reader response criticism piece called “You U.K. Le Guin” to my *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*, the first scholarly essay collection about women and science fiction.

Back to the present. Now, after writing about many many moons orbiting feminist planets – and surviving numerous lesser snowstorms (especially this winter’s seemingly ceaseless New York City snow deluge) – I am ever so much older than graduate student moi. I stare at the picture of Le Guin with a crown on her head – at science fiction’s reigning Queen Ursula. I contemplate what characterizes her present fantastic literature realm. Or, more simply stated: I ask, what’s new now?

Walidah Imarisha’s work on Octavia E. Butler exemplifies what I mean by the new, the now, and the fantastic: I refer to a cultural entity which at once springs from four decades of science fiction imaginative visions and is one with the present social milieu. Imarisha is co-editing (with adrienne maree brown [sic]) a forthcoming anthology called *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. The anthology presents “radical science fiction/speculative fiction/fantasy/horror/magical realism short stories written by activist-writers who are actively involved in building movements for social change...*Octavia’s Brood*...mixes science fiction and reality in a manner which highlights how science fiction is derived from social activism” (brown [sic] and Imarisha). As if envisioning new worlds derived from improving the real world is not enough, the co-editors and contributors wish to remember Butler by creating a Seattle park and naming it after her. Imarisha explains that “[t]his is a small park. But it can be small but mighty. And hopefully we can use this as a place to gather and remember Octavia’s legacy, honor it and move it forward.” Here is the source of these words, a video which describes the Butler Park idea:

The park’s would-be initiators, who presently stand on a vacant lot, resemble science fiction protagonists who wish to terraform a planet. The potential new real estate they envision burgeoning forth from Butler’s unreal literature estate certainly has nothing to do with New Criticism!

The women who participate in “The New! The Now! The Fantastic!: Authorial Innovation” generate newness in Imarisha’s exciting, innovative, and historically based vein. They exemplify exactly how women and science fiction, which is still a small field, is small but mighty. This ‘episode’ of *Deletion* is a place to gather, remember our past, celebrate the marvelous burgeoning present, and move the field forward. Read. Comment. Enjoy.

The following list describes how the contributors choose to fill this ‘episode’s’ space:

Sue Lange's [\*The Intervention\*](#) grapples with two social issues which have been outside feminist science fiction's purview: the fact that men are increasingly opting out of education and the opinion that prostitution can be a legitimate way for women to earn a living.

Sheila Finch is newly venturing into science fiction scholarship detailed in her piece [\*Murgatroyd, Maybe\*](#).

Seo-Young Chu's [\*Science-Fictional North Korea: A Defective History\*](#) provides a first effort to describe North Korea in terms of science fiction.

Wangechi Mutu's [\*The End of eating Everything\*](#) uses video art to provide an innovative means to confront global consumption.

Elyce Helford's [\*That Old Black Magic: Women, Race, and Post-Millennial U.S. Science Fiction Television\*](#) discusses current images of black women on television.

Elizabeth Lundberg's [\*A Sense of Wonder and Other Feminist Feelings\*](#) addresses the present state of feminist science fiction theory.

Marleen S. Barr defines 'SF/memoir' as a combination of autobiography and science fiction in her [\*The Pen Is Mightier than the Coop Board's Borg Queen: A SF/Memoir\*](#).

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Lundberg says this when describing her view of how feminist science fiction theory should progress: "I posit that some of the most exciting work happening in feminist science fiction theory right now is not connected to the label 'science fiction' at all – it's happening under the auspices of affect studies. Frequently tracing its flourishing as a theoretical 'turn' to Eve Sedgwick's work on Silvan Tomkins, but claiming a genealogy with roots in Deleuzian theory, British cultural studies, queer theory, and psychoanalysis, affect theory currently examines public cultures, trauma, sentimentalism, the everyday, theories of sensation and perception, and the politics of negative and positive emotions... In addition to doing feminist theory within science fiction, let's extend those parabolae into the other places feminist theory is happening as well" (Lundberg). When I was a graduate student, women science fiction writers were on no scholars' radar screens; feminist science fiction theory did not exist. This current graduate student's discourse is ever so much more sophisticated than graduate student moi's "Ursula Le Guin is good."

I said those words from the standpoint of a terra incognita void analogous to the vacant lot where the as yet nonexistent Octavia E. Butler Park might one day be located; Lundberg and her peers stand on a foundation that I and the feminist science fiction scholars of my generation created. We've come a long way baby!



What's next? All of the science fiction I have read and all of the science fiction scholarship I have authored of course do not enable me to say for certain. But, perhaps, I have circa a quarter of a century left to watch what happens. I hope that geriatric moi has the chance to meet the women from 'Whileaway'. If feminist extraterrestrials contact me, you will be the first to know. (I am a big yenta.) Meanwhile, I will be reading science fiction, generating science fiction theory, admiring new feminist science fiction scholarship – and eating all the O.M.G. totally awesome new yogurt brands which did not exist when I was relying on my 'Blizzard of '77' survival kit (such as Chobani, Siggi's Icelandic Style Skyr, Fage Total Greek Yogurt, and The Greek Gods). As for the potential time when real 'Whileaway' denizens might no longer be Greek to me – stay tuned.

- Marleen S. Barr

## References

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