Introduction: Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation

MARLEEN S. BARR

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital "L," and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. . . . Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it.

—Sven Birkerts, "Present at the Re-Creation"

I AM GOING TO STICK MY NECK OUT AND JUST SAY IT: SVEN Birkerts's now infamous review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a discriminatory diatribe symptomatic of a pathological, knee-jerk science fiction aversion that automatically denigrates all examples of the genre. Birkerts's utterances are fighting words, exemplifying what Neil Easterbrook calls the "antipathy for sf" that provokes "Genre Wars" (510). Genre wars are revolutionary wars in which liberty, equality, and fraternity (and sisterhood) confront spurious elitism in determining literary value. Revolutionary literary critics fighting in the genre wars trenches can view Birkerts's decision to stick his neck out as an egregious tactical error. The guillotine is no science fiction scenario.

"[E]ach year considerable ink spills over the Genre Wars," says Easterbrook (510). While spilling ink is preferable to spilling blood, waging genre wars is nonetheless problematic. Thanks to the efforts of Betty Friedan and Anita Hill, two discriminatory social problems that had no name are no longer nameless. Naming particular manifestations of the informatics of exclusion is an important advantage in wars involving spilling ink. Wishing to name Birkerts's stance, I proclaim that he espouses textism.

Textism is a discriminatory evaluation system in which all literature relegated to a so-called subliterary genre, regardless of its individual

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merits, is automatically defined as inferior, separate, and unequal (Westfahl and Slusser). Presenting the first science fiction special topic in *PMLA* is an emancipation proclamation for science fiction, a manifesto for the literature that imagines cyborg protagonists. I would like this special topic to function as a genre wars Battle of Gettysburg, a decisive turning point in the literary civil war against textism.

The hoped-for defeat of textism is a future utopian goal. It is too soon to win the genre wars. In this introduction's battle, please note that textists themselves produce prose that is less than erudite—namely, poor writing. Easterbrook points to Birkerts and Michiko Kakutani to indicate why textists who characterize all science fiction as bad writing should hold their fire: "writers who use phrases such as 'this is because' and 'cardboardy' ought to reflect upon their own house before again throwing stones" (510). Critics who write badly when defining science fiction as bad writing are as absurd as Rush Limbaugh railing against drug addiction while ingesting the prescription drugs to which he is addicted. (Genre wars are, of course, culture wars.) Issuing an emancipation proclamation for science fiction involves defining genre wars as a house divided against itself and emphasizing that this separated house cannot stand.

Giant Squid Attack Science Fiction

Margaret Atwood's reluctance to call her work science fiction is an example of the "house divided against itself" attitude. Although *Oryx and Crake* is certainly science fiction, Atwood does not wish to define her novel as science fiction. When she spoke at Columbia University on 6 May 2003, I publicly asked her this direct question: "Is *Oryx and Crake* science fiction?" Her point-blank answer: "*Oryx and Crake* is speculative fiction." She continued: "Speculative fiction includes works like *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and science fiction includes rockets and giant squid" (Reading). I was the only audience member who did not laugh when Atwood mentioned giant squid. Although I have encountered a plethora of rockets in science fiction's pages, my readerly close encounter with a giant squid occurred solely in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. The audience laughed when Atwood mentioned giant squid because she implied the same thing Birkerts did: science fiction is crap. Giant squid, rockets, and Verne's submarines (I imagine Birkerts echoing Dorothy's "oh my") are not science fiction; they are real entities in the real world.

I have one all-important objective: to argue that science fiction should be taken seriously as Literature with a capital "L." Science fiction is not crap. Because we live in a world ever more rapidly incorporating former science fiction scenarios, it is inappropriate to degrade science fiction as supposedly unreal.[1] My co-coordinator, Carl Freedman, and I assess the relevance of the field by pointing out that the science fiction genre is necessary to our survival in a science-fictional world. Yet, despite the crucial immediate temporal interplay between our environment and science fiction literature, English departments and most literary scholars continue to devalue science fiction. Yes, on the one hand, academic presses publish science fiction theory, the MLA has a long-standing science fiction, fantasy, and utopian studies discussion group, science fiction courses are taught, and the *PMLA* issue you now hold most certainly exists. On the other hand, it would not be a large stretch to say that you could count (and rest assured that I have been counting) on one hand the number of advertisements for a science fiction specialist posted in the *MLA Job Information List* during the last twenty-five years. Despite science fiction's importance, the ubiquitous job rejection "Your particular expertise does not coincide with the needs of our department" applies not merely to the individual science-fiction-specialist applicant but to the whole science fiction field. While university presses and academic journals publish the work of science fiction scholars, English departments do not seek to employ science fiction scholars.

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A comment famously attributed to Kingsley Amis sums up the bias confronting the science fiction field and its scholars: If it's good it can't be science fiction and if it's science fiction it can't be good. The propensity to ignore the fact that the great American novelist Kurt Vonnegut is a science fiction writer exemplifies Amis's observation. *The Sirens of Titan*, first issued as a Dell paperback, was nominated for a Hugo Award. The lauded *Slaughterhouse Five* is partially set on the planet Tralfamadore. Tralfamadore is not Peoria. Anyone claiming that Vonnegut is not a science fiction writer is as self-deluded as Al Pacino's Roy Cohn (the closeted gay associate of Senator Joseph McCarthy) in the televised version of *Angels in America*, insisting that he is dying of liver cancer, not AIDS. Vonnegut, like Atwood, has resisted the science fiction label for years. Ray Bradbury, the author of *The Martian Chronicles* (not *The Peoria Chronicles*), has lately joined Atwood and Vonnegut as a resisting science fiction writer. In these *PMLA* pages Brian W. Aldiss states, "No longer am I content to be labeled merely a sci-fi writer." Although science fiction is the most appropriate vehicle for literature and criticism for our time, writers and critics approach the term *science fiction* like troublesome tribbles fleeing a sinking starship.

Science Fiction Is Not "Krappe"

I could provide multitudinous examples of the genre that any reasonable person would not designate crap. Instead, I will let science fiction speak for itself. Here is Eric S. Rabkin's science fiction vision (a critical stance in opposition to Birkerts's), which imagines that the phrase *science fiction is crap* will become positive:

> [F]ew people today know that the very word "crap" took on its modern meaning through science fiction. Apparently the original term "krappe" . . . was a Dutch (Earth) word. . . . In the mid-20th century, Theodore Sturgeon, a science fiction writer, apparently in defense of science fiction against elite critics, is reputed to have said . . . "95% of science fiction is crap . . . but then, 95% of everything is crap." . . . In the late 20th century and the early 21st century, when science fiction, then known as SF, became not only accepted but thoroughly admired, people would say of it, "this is excellent crap" until finally "excellent" was assimilated into the core concept of "crap." Thus, "this SF is crap" . . . took on the happy, approbative sense [it] enjoy[s] today [in 2999]. (192–93)

The purpose of this *PMLA* science fiction special topic is to take Rabkin's science fiction vision and, in the words of *Star Trek*'s Captain Picard, "make it so": to facilitate efforts to make SF not only accepted but thoroughly admired.

Who would deny that, for example, Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, and Virginia Woolf produce Literature with a capital "L"? (Their texts, after all, do not include Birkerts's and Kakutani's "crap-esque" word choices "this is because" and "cardboardy.") Lessing, Piercy, and Woolf write science fiction. Hence: Mr. Birkerts, tear down your wall. On second thought: enough already. Enough of war analogies. I have so far evoked the French Revolution, the Civil War, the cold war, and last but not least the culture wars. Enough of the blood-spilling wars and the ink-spilling wars. An emancipation proclamation for science fiction appropriately should venture back to the future, not back to past history. *Star Wars* can address genre wars. Those ensconced in the Birkerts bivouac are, from where I stand as a science fiction critic, the dark side of the Force, a rasping, heavy-breathed, black-helmeted, black-booted, black-outfitted Darth Vader. To counter this version of Darth Vader, I call on Ursula K. Le Guin, dressed in a long flowing white robe as Princess Leia, cast as a female Jedi knight. She holds a rolled copy of her essay "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" and wields her text against textists, like a laser-light sword.

Before I bring Le Guin's essay to bear on this emancipation proclamation for science fiction, I am going to stick my neck out momentarily and just say it: I lift the visor of Darth Vader's helmet

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and find the face of the *PMLA* Editorial Board. Why? Because the board rejected the vast majority of the articles it considered for this issue. This is not the science fiction special topic Carl Freedman and I wish to present. We would have liked to include some of the articles the board turned down. We emphasize that we are not responsible for the physical thinness of this collection.

Dragons Terrorize Americans

Moving from my ink-spilling pen back to the mighty textual laser sword I imaginatively place in Le Guin's hand, I refer to her aforementioned essay. "So: why are Americans afraid of dragons?" asks Le Guin. As if on the game show *Jeopardy* (an apt description for engaging in genre wars as a feminist science fiction critic), Le Guin answers with more questions: "Americans are not only antifantasy, but altogether antifiction. . . . 'I live in the real world.' Who speaks so? Who is it that dismisses *War and Peace*, *The Time Machine*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with this perfect self-assurance?" (35). Who speaks so? Who is it that dismisses *Orlando*, *Shikasta*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* with Birkerts-like perfect self-assurance?

The answer: textists. How can literary critics logically denigrate the science fiction literary masterpieces Le Guin and I cite? To do so is to castigate works of the imagination. To be a literary critic who is afraid of starships (not to mention phasers, warp drives, photon torpedoes, and other starship accoutrements) is to be a literary critic who is antifiction. An antifiction literary critic is as impossibly absurd as a Jewish pope. The epigraph to this introduction would be more logically signed by Pope Murray Isidore Cohenberg-Horowitzstein, a denizen of an alternative Rome situated in a galaxy far far away, than by Sven Birkerts, America, Earth. Refraining from further Jewish humor (a tried-and-true response to discrimination)—refraining from emulating Mel Brooks and penning "Springtime for Birkerts and the Board"—I will simply state that, like all isms, textism does not hold water (neither mundane water nor holy water). Water seeps through "cardboardy" containers.

Pope Murray Isidore Cohenberg-Horowitzstein Issues Edict: "I Do Not Read Science Fiction"

Not all textists are card-carrying critical evil empire members. I admired the late Carolyn Heilbrun to the extent that her fiction inspired me to write my novel *Oy Pioneer!* (in which her protagonist Kate Fansler appears). I decided to tell her so. She responded in an August 2003 e-mail message that she recalled contributing a piece to a 1984 collection of mine on science fiction. She added, "I shall certainly look out for your novel, *read* it, and recommend it widely" (italics mine).

Thus, Heilbrun was open to reading science fiction in 2003. *Oy Pioneer!* is replete with science fiction tropes. But she felt differently in 1984. When I asked her to contribute to a special issue of *Women's Studies International Forum* of which I was guest editor (called *Oh Well, Orwell: Big Sister Is Watching Herself: Feminist Science Fiction in 1984*), she generously agreed to participate—and unequivocally stated to me that she did not read science fiction. Although someone who does not read science fiction does not read *Orlando*, *The Tempest*, and *Slaughterhouse Five*, I followed this direction: I asked Heilbrun to write a piece called "Why I Don't Read Science Fiction." She did not feel she was sticking her neck out by "just saying it": "I want to make perfectly clear that the only reason I am contributing to this feminist science fiction issue is that I don't read science fiction" (117). Heilbrun refused the unreal and the alien that characterize science fiction by writing, "I live here" (119). Her comment evokes the response of Le Guin's imagined dragon-fearing Americans: "I live in the real world."

Heilbrun, a renowned feminist critic who states in her piece that she admires Le Guin and Joanna Russ, nevertheless chose not to read sci-

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ence fiction. Why? I fear that she was afraid of dragons—that she valorized the real and eschewed the alien. She says, "I had to admit that science fiction was, for me, a foreign land. . . . I don't scorn science fiction, any more than I scorn *Afghanistan*; I'm just one of those who stay at home and mumble about the problems at hand" (117; italics mine).[2] The problem at hand *is* the alien; the problem at hand *is* Afghanistan. Staying home no longer shields Americans from a problem that definitely has a name: al-Qaeda. Americans have learned the hard way that staying home and refusing to confront the alien offers no solution to America's problem at hand.

I live here. I live in 2004. I live in Manhattan. My problem at hand is not George Orwell's *1984* scenario about Big Brother (or Big Sister). My problem at hand is what I saw when I was just one of those who stay at home. I looked out my living room window and saw the empty space that replaced the collapsed World Trade Center towers. When Frank McCourt spoke on the second anniversary of 9/11, he poignantly recalled initially thinking that the first attacking plane was part of a science fiction story: "I was in London. I heard two women say a plane hit the World Trade Center. Why do they always talk about science fiction?" My problem at hand is that I saw the science fiction cliché the science fiction film *Independence Day* portrays—aliens attacking from the sky to wreak Armageddon on Manhattan landmarks—become American reality. I saw science fiction become my reality. I saw why it is ludicrous to be a textist who claims that science fiction is inferior because it is not real. This claim belongs to a world we do not live in—the fictitious world in which Pope Murray Isidore Cohenberg-Horowitzstein issues edicts. Enough of the war on terrorism. Back to the genre wars.

Shake, Rattle, and Roll

What to do about the discrimination science fiction suffers? Well, I can't respond by wielding a *Star Wars* laser sword. Although laser swords, once purely science-fictional, can now be manufactured, as far as I am aware no one has yet made them available to the general public. Never fear. Science fiction provides a readily obtainable and socially acceptable alternative to laser sword wielding. A newly renowned science fiction author describes an object that can be grasped and shaken in defiance of textism: "There are women dancing. . . . They shake belled rattles, like many assons" (Hopkinson 216). The black feminist Caribbean Canadian science fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson, a textist's worst nightmare, wrote this passage about women who shake rattles, not men who brandish laser swords.

I saw a premier American novelist—a writer who, once upon a time, would have been subjected to textism—encompass the relation between Heilbrun's and Le Guin's essays and mirror Hopkinson's rattle shakers. How? "I live in the real world," said Le Guin's imagined respondent. "I live here," said Heilbrun. "Wherever spirit leads us is where we live," said Alice Walker (presenting her keynote address at a conference on Zora Neale Hurston to a capacity crowd in Barnard College's LeFrak Gymnasium). I saw Walker make real the rattle Hopkinson imagines.

Walker, speaking in the voice of a once-silenced racial group, sounds like a feminist science fiction protagonist: "How can anyone think that we will get anywhere with male planetary leadership?" Walker asks. The feminist science fiction writers whose spirits move them to imagine worlds that posit alternatives to male planetary leadership answer Walker. Textists at once denigrate and refuse to read feminist science fiction; I have spent my twenty-five-year career arguing that feminist science fiction writers create good things indeed. I did not laugh at Atwood's comment about giant squid; when I saw Walker move from speaking like a science fiction author to acting like Hopkinson's science fiction characters, I was among the loudest applauders. No militaristic Jedi knight, Walker waged genre wars by acting as Hopkinson's rattle shaker, by literally wielding a rattle onstage. As she shook

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it—and she did so continuously—she explained her desire "to change energy . . . to remove the spirit of the academic aura from the audience."

I share Walker's objective. Lacking a laser sword, like Walker and Hopkinson's dancers, I wish to shake a rattle too. Like Walker's audience, resoundingly approving of her nonsaber rattling, I welcome efforts to remove the spirit of the academic aura. If Walker can stick out her neck and just say it, so can Barr. I am trying to remove the spirit of the academic aura, the textist voices that deprecate and automatically dismiss science fiction. I also wish to replace genre wars with peaceful coexistence. Walker, belonging to a human genre once marginalized and silenced, is now venerated. I wish the same for science fiction. I wish that those who honor Walker would also honor Nalo Hopkinson. I wish that I did not endure an entire MLA convention panel devoted to Samuel Delany that never mentioned he is a science fiction writer (Race, Sex, and Genre in the Writing of Samuel R. Delany [2000]). (Ignoring the fact that Delany is a science fiction writer is analogous to ignoring the fact that the pope—no reference to the fictitious Pope Murray Isidore Cohenberg-Horowitzstein intended—is Christian. Don't mind me. I'm being Walkeresque. I'm shaking my rattle. I'm living wherever my spirit leads me. My present location: a place where one can wield a rattle and be cast as an academic-aura ghost buster in the pages of *PMLA*. "Laser lights and rattles and ghost busters, oh my"—that is, "aaargh!" and to some, "oy veh"—I imagine the board saying.) "Ideas come from truth," concludes Walker. I want to tell it as it is—sans the spirit of the academic aura. Shake, rattle, and role. Right on. Write on. Happily, Anita Hill acquainted us with speaking truth to power.

Alleged Lesbian Talking Horse (of Course, of Course) Terrorizes American Movie Producer

In *Oy Pioneer!* I shake my rattle at the academic aura, speak truth to power, and tell it as it is. Thinking of *Oy Pioneer!*, I am reminded that the prevailing discrimination against science fiction affects me as a fiction writer who creates science fiction, not only as a literary critic who specializes in science fiction. The novel's protagonist, a feminist science fiction critic named Sondra Lear (who is not a colleague of Shulamyth Squidsky, the feminist science fiction critic you will meet in my conclusion), enlists a talking horse named Ms. Ed (of course, of course) to help her husband hunt. A film scout who brought *Oy Pioneer!* to the attention of a Hollywood producer told me that the producer "wanted to film a realistic romantic comedy. The producer is not interested in a lesbian feminist talking horse." Ms. Ed is a heterosexual talking horse; but Ms. Ed's sexual preference is not the point. The point is that, like textist reviewers, the producer who considered my work is prejudiced against unreal premises.

Why is an American movie producer afraid of talking horses? Le Guin answers this question when she refers to "a moral disapproval of fantasy, a disapproval so intense, and often so aggressive, that I cannot help but see it as arising, fundamentally, from fear" (34). The producer is afraid of talking horses for the same reason that Americans are afraid of dragons.

Young Black American Writers Are Not Afraid of Dragons—and Giant Squid

While it is useless for Americans to be afraid of dragons, textists expressed their views even as Stephen King received the National Book Foundation's 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Joel Conarroe wrote in response to King's award, "And isn't it literacy, after all, and not popular entertainment, that the National Book Foundation is (or should be) all about?" Conarroe's textist assumption overlooks the foundation's goal: "to promote the broad cultural value of American writing. Commercial popularity and literary excellence are not mutually exclusive" (Wiley and Baldwin).

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Deborah E. Wiley and Neil Baldwin speak truth to powers that advocate textism.

Many of the most exciting new voices echoing this truth are black science fiction writers, whose talents shine in the face of racism and textism. Walter Mosley describes this trend when he, like Le Guin, asks and answers a question about science fiction: "So where are all the black science fiction writers?" ("Black" 204). His answer indicates that many young black American writers are not afraid of dragons—and giant squid:

> Everywhere I go I meet young black poets and novelists who are working on science fiction manuscripts. . . . Within the next five years I predict there will be an explosion of science fiction from the black community. When I tell black audiences that I've written a novel in this genre [*Futureland*] they applaud. And following that explosion will be the beginning of a new world of autonomy created out of the desire to scrap five hundred years of intellectual imperialism. (203–04)

Mosley's "Black to the Future" brings me back to the present, back to genre wars. The applause Mosley hears echoes the applause I heard in LeFrak Gymnasium when Alice Walker shook her rattle to exorcize the spirit of the academic aura. Mr. Birkerts and Mr. Conarroe, tear down your textist walls. Mosley's term "intellectual imperialism" is synonymous with textism. Young black science fiction writers deserve to be considered the great American writers of the future.

American Literature Terrorizes Americans

The *New York Times* states that Stephen King can be added to the list of great modern American writers—a list that finally includes someone who looks like Mosley: "When they call the roll of the great figures of modern American literature—Bellow, Miller, Morrison, Updike, Roth—they can now add a name: Stephen King" ("Shining Moment"). This roll call of literary greatness enshrines four Jewish men, one black woman, and one WASP man. (I notice that no white woman is mentioned—but who is counting?) Before, say, 1980 no black woman would have been included on the list. Before, say, 1945 no Jewish man would have been included on the list. Before, say, 1940 no American person would have been called a great figure of literature. Once upon a time, all American authors were deemed inferior to British authors. If science fiction becomes real to the extent that a time machine is invented, a time traveling literary critic could go back to, say, 1936 and ask, Why are Americans afraid of American literature? Why are Americans afraid of Hawthorne and Melville? Heilbrun's "I live here" provides an appropriate answer to the past's obsessive (and self-denigrating) Anglophiles who just happened to be Americans living in America and working in English departments. (In the light of where Americans live and the fact that American literature is no longer designated inferior, is it time for "English department" to be changed to "American department"? Further, since American reality increasingly resembles *The Jetsons*, it will soon be time to house all literary scholars in the science fiction department. Once upon a time—well before Rabkin's science-fictional year 2999—science fiction department denizens will all teach "excellent crap.")

Evangeline Chops Down Cherry Tree in Primeval Forest

Once upon a time, cultural studies, film criticism, television criticism, feminist theory, creative writing, queer theory, and all ethnic literature were seen as beyond the pale. While the once despised areas I list have been granted belated respectability, science fiction still suffers from the slings and arrows of outrageous textism. Nothing stays the same, however. *PMLA* is publishing a science fiction special topic. Change happens: "The National Book Foundation . . . has decided to bestow its annual medal . . . on the man who bestowed pig's blood . . . on our libraries"

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("Shining Moment"). The National Book Foundation proclaims that textism is hogwash.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (who, like Stephen King, is vulnerable to textist discrimination because he is both American and popular) created a character who emotionally stirs people despite being fictitious. A statue of Evangeline stands at a Canadian national historic site in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia, to mark where the main expulsion of the Acadians by the British occurred. Evangeline inspires Acadian solidarity as surely as George Washington inspires American national pride. "Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true" (Le Guin 40).

Nonfictional texts, realistic fictional texts, and science-fictional texts engage with reality similarly. So: what's with all the categories, and what's with all the textism and discrimination? Science fiction is true, of course. It is often factual; it often will become factual—and it is true. Hence: this introduction's emancipation proclamation: like all people, all literary genres are created equal. Or: it is easy to poke holes through textists' "cardboardy" assertions. Conarroe, for example, fails to note that—like King—Longfellow and even Shakespeare created popular literature.

Cornelius Vanderbilt II Builds Holodeck

The reciprocity between science fiction and reality is pervasive: even architecture—very real structures cemented in stone—functions science-fictionally. For example, the Breakers, the summer "cottage" Cornelius Vanderbilt II built in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1893, acts as a reality-based time machine. Vanderbilt's Italian Renaissance–style palazzo does not reflect realistic nineteenth-century American style, since the rest of 1893 Rhode Island is closer to 2004 Peoria than it is to Renaissance Italy. Vanderbilt created an illusion of Renaissance authenticity, a fantasy vision existing in the confines of temporal reality. The Breakers is a precursor to the simulacra characterizing present-day Las Vegas. Caesars Palace Hotel is no more appropriately situated in Nevada than furniture copied from a Venetian palace is appropriately situated in Vanderbilt's morning room. Vanderbilt's house and Las Vegas hotels relocate nonindigenous culture and skew temporal reality to create real fantasy environments. Newport mansions and Las Vegas hotels are precursors to the *Star Trek* holodeck, where computer programs allow people to experience directly any time or place. The holodeck does not discriminate between real individuals and fictitious characters. Holodeck vacationers can speak with Julius Caesar in his palace, Cornelius Vanderbilt II in his cottage, and Sherlock Holmes in his home. Americans, the people afraid of dragons, actualize Le Guin's concept of real fantasy.

Disney World functions as yet another American holodeck. People afraid of traveling to China can see Chinese dragons—as well as other international cultural representations—in Orlando, Florida. So, what's with the categories, the venerated real and the devalued unreal? Michael Jackson is white. Carol Channing recently said she is black. Anatole Broyard never said he was black. Some straight guys want to be seen with queer eyes.

Feminist Science Fiction Critic Is Mad as Hell for Twenty-Five Years

Carl Freedman's afterword reads Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger as exemplifying the blurred distinctions between unreal science fiction scenarios and real life. Politicians who fail to play top gun successfully can say *hasta la vista*, baby, to politics. George W. Bush is pictured holding a Thanksgiving turkey in Iraq because he is scrambling to deflect attention from the point that his famous aircraft carrier stance had the opposite of the intended effect. It is plain for all to see that no top gun appeared on the aircraft carrier. Bush is no Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger, no wooden stock character, has brilliantly discerned how to live Life with a capital "L" in a world in which politics is synonymous with entertainment and science fiction is synonymous with reality.

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When Bush first declared war on Iraq, I heard it whimsically suggested that the conflict should be resolved by recalling all the soldiers and having Bush personally fight it out with Saddam Hussein. This fantasy scenario is applicable to resolving genre wars. Enough already with all the spilled ink. Let's have Schwarzenegger fight it out with Birkerts. This is a test: who would most people bet on? Why do I imagine positioning Schwarzenegger and Birkerts as political arena cockfight combatants? As I frame my simple answer, I hear *Fiddler on the Roof*. I hear Tevye asking Golde if she loves him and Golde, in response, repeating, "For twenty-five years. . . ." For twenty-five years, I have experienced bias against science fiction and science fiction critics. For twenty-five years, I have been told that I am not really an American literature scholar. Do I love science fiction? Do I *vhat*? If "that's not love" (i.e., twenty-five years enduring professional tsuris[3] of the kind this introduction itself will evoke), *vhat* is? (If you thought you were off the hook when I promised not to pen "Springtime for Birkerts and the Board," think again! Responding to adversity with humor is tradition, tradition! for Jewish writers.) I love science fiction. I love being a feminist science fiction critic. Hence: I join Alice Walker as she shakes her rattle.

Hence: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take it anymore!" (Hence: I will stick my neck out and just say it in a cartoon voice: take that, textists. Thwack. Zap.) After twenty-five years, it's nice to know that I *can* stick my neck out and just say it. While doing so, I imaginatively hear Governor Schwarzenegger laying down the law to textists: it's *hasta la vista*, baby. The guillotine is real—and it is antiquated.

Now Hear This (Part 1): Philip K. Dick's World Is Tradition, Tradition!; *Vhat*? If Dick's Not Reality, *Vhat* Is?

It is also antiquated to cut down all texts placed in purportedly lower-echelon genres. Film dialogue pervaded Schwarzenegger's political campaign. Stanley Aronowitz, a City University of New York sociology professor who countered the ivory tower stereotype when he ran for governor of New York, illustrates how allusions to science fiction and fantasy fill academic discourse. He describes Schwarzenegger as a "Philip K. Dick character, a simulacrum." Embracing Dick's world is a sign of our times: "The engine that makes Mr. Dick's stories go is a pervasive and finely articulated paranoia about government, technology, personal relationships—and the nature of reality itself. . . . In Philip Dick's world, reality itself can be the culprit" (Staples). I live here. I live in a Philip K. Dick science fiction world. A pulp science fiction writer, marginalized until all too recently, best describes the real world we all know.

Are there diehard textists who remain unconvinced that science fiction is not crap? They should now hear this:

> Where is the powerful cautionary fiction about the society we did wind up living in? Those with a robust tolerance for . . . the vertiginous sensation of reality disintegrating underfoot . . . can find it in the work of Philip K. Dick. . . . Since his best work was published as pulp science fiction, they've had their hands full just trying to win him a little credibility. Meanwhile, almost unremarked, Dick's sensibility has seeped wide and deep into contemporary life. . . . Dickian devices and themes—implanted memories, commodified identities, simulacra—haunt contemporary literary fiction as well [such as in the works of David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Haruki Murakami]. (Miller)

Science fiction permeates reality. Science fiction permeates literary fiction. Science fiction and literary fiction are no longer separate genres. Textism is a fantasy island accessible solely by a ship of fools.

I position Marge Piercy answering Sven Birkerts. Piercy seems to pose a corollary to Le Guin's question, why are Americans afraid of dragons?: "Why do I think speculative and utopian fiction important?" Her answer, which Birkerts and his fellow textists should now hear:

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> In the standard hierarchy of literature as rated by its critics . . . [g]enre writing is generally looked down upon. . . . All fictions embody assumptions about what is right and what is wrong. . . . We all make up the future, and sometimes it is a delicious dream and sometimes it is a nightmare. . . . I have played with some fantasies about sex in the year 3000, but finally, I believe that a good novel does it all better, which is one reason I read and write speculative fiction. ("Love" 145)

In the genre wars, my stance is clear. I have made my case regarding "assumptions about what is right and what is wrong." I am responsible for the publication of Heilbrun's statement about why she does not read science fiction—and for Piercy's statement about why she does.

Now Hear This (Part 2): Birkerts Writes Science Fiction—*Vhat*!?

Now hear something for which I am not responsible. Now hear this: Sven Birkerts writes science fiction. For true: when reviewing fiction by Richard Bausch and Ron Carlson, Birkerts states, "If a team of extraterrestrials were to swoop down to earth. . . ." And, "True, our visitors might have determined something similar after earlier expeditions . . ." ("Field Guides"). Extraterrestrials swooping down to Earth during numerous expeditions? If that's not science fiction, *vhat* is?

Extra, Extra, Read All about It (Part 1): *PMLA* Science Fiction Special Topic; or, You Can't Be Too Rich or Too Thin?

Carl Freedman and I are responsible for what was once only a delicious dream, the first *PMLA* science fiction special topic. (Because of the nightmare that is textism, in the past the possibility of focusing on science fiction in an issue of *PMLA* involved the ability to dream an impossible dream. This topic's appearance constitutes my quest—and for twenty-five years [but who is counting?] I have followed my star. However, since one Broadway allusion per introduction is sufficient, enough already with this vein.) I have explained that we are dissatisfied with the specific reason why this issue is too thin. But, be that as it may, we are proud of the exceedingly rich content we are able to present. Our contributors join Piercy in explaining why they read (and, in some instances, write) science fiction.

The *PMLA* Editorial Board has seen fit to allow us to include five superb contributions to science fiction critical discourse: Samuel R. Delany's "Joanna Russ and D. W. Griffith," Jane Donawerth's "Body Parts: Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Short Stories by Women," N. Katherine Hayles and Nicholas Gessler's "The Slipstream of Mixed Reality: Unstable Ontologies and Semiotic Markers in *The Thirteenth Floor*, *Dark City*, and *Mulholland Drive*," Eric S. Rabkin's "Science Fiction and the Future of Criticism," and Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan's "Alien Sex Acts in Feminist Science Fiction: Heuristic Models for Thinking a Feminist Future of Desire."

These essays underscore that, as Freedman and I emphasize, we live in science fiction worlds. Delany calls attention to the bizarre reality that ensues in the wake of textist dismissals of science fiction: Joanna Russ, one of the most important American writers of the second half of the twentieth century, has not been recognized as such. Patriarchal reality's penchant for reducing women to body parts does not sit well with Russ—or with Jane Donawerth. In reading science fiction about female body parts, Donawerth, sans the patriarchal gaze, declines to put female body parts together again. Hayles and Gessler invite their readers to gaze at three films in a way that nullifies the distinction between virtual reality and reality, a way that reflects the lack of differentiation between science fiction and reality. Like Hayles and Gessler, Rogan explores the relation between speculative spaces and real spaces. She explains that alien sex acts' dialectical depictions point toward the possibility of instituting feminist scenarios.

Each of the essays constituting this issue exemplifies how critical discussions that incorporate science fiction advance the enterprise of contem-

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porary cultural criticism and theory. Delany and Rabkin reveal that the marginalization of science fiction has resulted in large gaps regarding our understanding of contemporary fiction and theory. Donawerth's discussion of female body parts and Rogan's analysis of alien sex acts show the significance of the relation between feminist theoretical discourse and science fiction written by and about women. Hayles and Gessler point to the pervasive presence of science fiction in American culture when they observe that, in the films they analyze, "slipstream" worlds often cannot be definitively assigned to either science fiction or ordinary reality. Each essay individually demonstrates several of the potentially infinite ways critical discussions of contemporary reality progress when critics use science fiction as a locus for their discussions.

With Delany, Freedman, and Rabkin in mind, I view this special topic as presenting an image of the science fiction field highlighting the notion that critical theory, science fiction, and contemporary reality are each a version of the others, that science fiction is integral to imaginative literature and literary theory—and, as Tevye would say, to life. For example, when making the point that President Bush's announced initiative to send astronauts to Mars could be financially affordable if the astronauts undertake a one-way trip, Paul Davies, professor of natural philosophy at the Australian Center for Astrobiology, comments that an "initial colony of four astronauts . . . could make their own oxygen, grow some food and even initiate building projects using local raw materials. . . . The early outpost . . . would form the basis for a much more ambitious colonization program. . . . In time, the colony would grow to the point of being self-sustaining." Only one minor detail differentiates Davies's reality-based text from the premise of Mars Society President Robert Zubrin's science fiction novel *First Landing* (2001): Zubrin imagines that an initial colony of five astronauts will sustain itself on Mars. The result of the near-mirror-image similarity between Zubrin's science fiction and Davies's nonfiction—humanity's future—will be that what we now call science fiction about human beings colonizing Mars will become as mundane as John Updike's realistic fiction about suburbia. *The Martian Chronicles* and *Couples* will belong to the same genre. Fiction writers and critical theorists will count themselves among the human/Martian descendants of the four or five people who initially colonize Mars. One day, the existence of universities on Mars will not be science fiction. One day, when the first issue of the *Publications of the Martian Language Association* is hot off the press, the contributors to the Correspondents Abroad section appearing in its pages might hail from galaxies far, far away.

To formulate our special topic's Correspondents Abroad feature, we asked science fiction writers and critics how their approach to science fiction intersects with the particular cultural and political circumstances in which they write. Participants from Canada, Britain, South Africa, Greece, and Italy responded to our invitation.

The correspondents see the same ambivalence toward science fiction I have addressed, in the United States and in their own countries. Brian W. Aldiss and Margaret Atwood, for instance, point to the fact that national boundaries do not circumscribe the reluctance of well-known science fiction authors to associate themselves with the term *science fiction*. Deirdre C. Byrne and Domna Pastourmatzi examine causes and results of the reticence to engage with science fiction in their countries (or, as Le Guin would say, they explain why their nations' readers are "afraid of dragons"): the dearth of access to cutting-edge technology in South Africa and Greece leads to a dearth of South African and Greek science fiction writers and readers. The correspondents enable American readers to see the science fiction field with international eyes. These international eyes—eyes alien and other in relation to American self-absorption—view the same conditions visible to the American science fiction community.

The correspondents share Raffaella Baccolini's and Darko Suvin's use of the word "hope." Baccolini uses "hope" in her title, and Suvin points

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to "a hope" that writers and critics "can make an important difference." Byrne mentions "the ever-renewing power of science fiction." Aldiss says writers should "deeply hope" that their stories "will contribute to the wisdom and happiness-in-reflection of others." Gwyneth Jones explains that although "the hopeful time is forgotten," she copes by "looking back, out of the imaginary frame of the future." Pastourmatzi observes that science fiction provides "an ideal way to make [students] think about the impact of high tech on personal, national, and global levels." Atwood, perhaps with Le Guin's not-so-frightening dragons in mind, proclaims, "Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty but a necessity, because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it." Reading utopian science fiction from the standpoint of the dystopian political present encourages us to hope that we can imagine and create a more utopian future. Looking back, out of the imaginary frame of the future, science fiction turns Planet Earth into a place called Hope. Carl Freedman and I are privileged to place the material that follows in your hands.

"Therefore, not farewell, dear reader/voyager, but fare forward," says Atwood (as you will see), echoing the tradition, tradition! of T. S. Eliot. "Go, little book," Joanna Russ instructs *The Female Man*, echoing the tradition, tradition! of Chaucer. Go, little *PMLA* science fiction special topic, now liberated from the spirit of the academic aura. Or (as you will also see): Atwood mentions "the talking squid of Saturn." Squid, be they gargantuan or garrulous, do in reality wrongfully attack science fiction. The talking squid of Saturn are textist talking heads. The talking squid of Saturn are not kosher.

Extra, Extra, Read All about It (Part 2): "Rover Unfurls, Opening New Stage in Exploring Mars" (Headline, *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2004)

Maybe the Viking landers missed the real story. . . . Maybe the Martians were beneath the surface, dwelling in dark, moist ecosystems.

—William J. Broad

The robotic rover *Spirit* trundled along the Martian surface searching for water. *Spirit* thrust a probe into the soil and took a picture of a very large spritz—and a tentacle. At that moment, Professor Shulamyth Squidsky, a feminist talking squid of Mars who chairs the science fiction department at Mars Equatorial University, Gusev Crater Underwater Branch, was swimming toward a department meeting. She saw a long metallic unidentified probing object, which, relying on her expertise as a feminist science fiction scholar, she was able to identify immediately. Squidsky grasped the probe with one tentacle and her communication device with another as she excitedly relayed her discovery to her *PMLA* science fiction issue co-coordinator, Dean Karl Stanley Fishwasser. "Oy, Karl, it isn't bad enough that I have to devise a unifying theme for the correspondents abroad hailing from Vulcan, Arcturus, Tralfamadore, and Whileaway. Oy, I've discovered a phallic device sent by earthlings. Oy, there's life on Earth. When the textists read all about this news, they will finally take science fiction seriously. Oy, even though I have no neck, and I must stick my neck out and just scream it [an allusion all earthling science fiction scholars will immediately recognize[4]], I've decided to narrate my close encounter at the conclusion of the introduction to our first science fiction issue of *PMLA*. What a perfect way to remove the *Spirit* of the academic aura from the *Publications of the Martian Language Association*."

Notes

[1] Shaviro emphasizes that science fiction and social reality have become almost indistinguishable.

[2] Here is the full context of Heilbrun's statements: "I had to admit that science fiction was, for me, a foreign land with an unknown language and mysterious manners. I don't scorn science fiction, any more than I scorn Afghanistan;

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I'm just one of those who stay at home and mumble about the problems at hand. . . . I think we must imagine, not a fantastic world, but how we might speak and act differently in this one. . . . But that language [the language of other fictions, other possibilities, and other language in patriarchal language], those fictions must, at least for me, be learned the hard way: in the world where we live. . . . These [the features of feminist utopias] are, indeed, longings from many female hearts, including mine. But I live here, where I must find the language to incarnate these things: whether through weakness of intellect or paucity of imagination, I am not content, nor even able, to dream them" (117–19).

[3] For specific examples of close encounters with "professional tsuris" see my *Oy Pioneer!*

[4] I refer to Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" (1967).

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