WOMEN WITH WINGS: GENDER AND REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN AMERICAN PULP SCIENCE FICTION BY WOMEN

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SYNOPSIS

Thesis Title:

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Area of Research:

Although the genre of science fiction has gained traction in the literary-critical establishment in recent decades, the pulp magazines that were integral to the formation and development of the genre continue to languish in obscurity. Widely regarded as "the literary trash of the early twentieth century,"[1] pulp SF magazines such as *Amazing Stories, Wonder Stories,* and *Astounding Stories* have been held responsible for the longstanding popular perception of SF as a disreputable genre peddling sensationalism, escapism, and cheap thrills, and therefore not warranting serious scholarly attention. The pulps, too, have contributed to their own neglect by virtue of their fundamentally ephemeral form—printed on cheap untrimmed wood pulp paper that was coarse, brittle, and prone to rapid

[1] David M. Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2009), 6.

degeneration, the pulp magazines that flooded the market were intended to be read and then discarded. Today, pulp magazine fiction has been reduced to the status of what Earle calls a "subjugated knowledge," and the new respectability that SF has attained in recent years rests partially on efforts to consciously distance the genre from its pulp origins.[2]

My thesis seeks not only to draw renewed attention to the role played by the pulps in the history of SF, but to approach the problem through a specific lens—one that focuses on the women writers of the pulp SF magazines. There is a general tendency to regard the SF pulps as primarily masculine territory, and indeed men constituted the vast majority of SF authorship and readership in the early twentieth century, but relatively recent scholarship by Jane Donawerth and Eric Leif Davin has revealed that women have been active (albeit minority) participants in the genre since its very inception, and that their presence was largely welcomed by most of the male editors and readers. Moreover, women writers actively used the SF medium and its tools to challenge the "dominant male paradigm" of the genre and accommodate themes and issues of special interest/relevance to women. Davin's conception of the genre as "contested terrain" open to "competing interpretations and worldviews" has informed the tenor of my study.[3]

My research on pulp science fiction covers the period from 1926 to 1950, with 1926 marking the birth of *Amazing Stories*, the first pulp magazine dedicated exclusively to science fiction, and with 1950 representing a critical "turning point in science fiction's fortunes" that led to "the end of the dominance of the pulp format magazine and the start of the digest magazine."[4] Mike Ashley's thorough and comprehensive historical overview

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[2] Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism*, 13.
[3] Eric Leif Davin, *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926–1965* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 17.
[4] Mike Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

of this phase of SF magazine publishing highlights the sheer variety of available magazines and the many different editorial approaches to the question of what science fiction should be. For analytical convenience, I have examined the SF published in the pulp era in terms of two broad temporal/chronological categories named after the two most influential SF editors of this period. I refer to the period from 1926 to 1936 as the Gernsback era after Hugo Gernsback, the man who not only launched *Amazing Stories* in April 1926 but also followed it up with a series of other similar magazines over the next few years, until financial difficulties prompted him to move away from the burgeoning genre. After a brief transitional period, 1938 marks the beginning of the Campbell era, named after John W. Campbell, Jr., the new editor of *Astounding Stories*, which had been *Amazing*'s chief competitor in the SF market since 1930. If Gernsback can be credited with giving life to a new form of writing and solidifying its status as a recognisable genre, Campbell was responsible for guiding the genre towards its period of maturity by rejecting the garish excesses of the pulp past and promoting a greater emphasis on sound scientific ideas, realism, and literary experimentation. Campbell would remain the field's foremost editor till 1950, when new competitors began to emerge in the form of digest magazines such as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Galaxy Science Fiction*.

My specific focus is on the writing published by recognisably female authors in the science fiction magazines during the pulp era. This is an extremely under-explored area in SF criticism, as the pulps in general have not received much sustained critical attention until very recently. Although it is acknowledged that women have always written science fiction (Brian Aldiss famously pronounced Mary Shelley the first science fiction writer[5]), scholarly assessments of women's SF have tended to focus on the late twentieth century,

[5] Brian W. Aldiss, with David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Paladin, 1988), 29.

based on the mistaken perception that writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr. were among the first to incorporate thoughtful engagements with feminism into the realm of SF. Such an assumption is based on a skewed understanding of SF history that fails to take the pulp era into account. Women entered the genre SF landscape almost as soon as the first pulp magazines came into publication. The June 1927 issue of *Amazing Stories* published "The Fate of the Poseidonia," a story that Clare Winger Harris had submitted for a writing contest announced by Gernsback in an earlier issue and that had won the third prize in the competition. In his introductory comment on the story, Gernsback famously stated that "as a rule, women do not make good scientifiction writers, because their education and general tendencies on scientific matters are usually limited."[6] Nevertheless, he was warmly appreciative of Harris's "extraordinarily impressive" submission and expressed the hope that she would send more stories to the magazine in the future.

The following years would not only see the publication of other stories by Harris in the Gernsback pulps but also the appearance of new women writers in the world of genre science fiction, such as Leslie F. Stone, Lilith Lorraine, Minna Irving, M. F. Rupert, Kathleen Ludwick, L. Taylor Hansen, Sophie Wenzel Ellis, and Amelia Reynolds Long. Their contributions were uneven in proportion: while a few female authors wrote multiple stories for the pulps (with Stone having been the most prolific in these early stages), others published only one story and virtually disappeared from the scene. It is, however, notable that Hansen was the only author from the aforementioned list who felt the need to conceal her gender. All the other authors were identifiable as women (M. F. Rupert's story "Via the Hewitt Ray" was accompanied by an author sketch that was expressly feminine), and

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6. Clare Winger Harris, "The Fate of the Poseidonia," *Amazing Stories* 2, no. 3 (June 1927): 245–52, 267, https://archive.org/details/AmazingStoriesVolume02Number03/page/n38/mode/1up. The introductory note to the story was written by Gernsback.

even those who used pseudonyms such as Lorraine and Irving chose overly feminine names.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, several new female authors had followed in the footsteps of Harris and Stone, including Helen Weinbaum, Edna Mayne Hull, C. L. Moore, and Leigh Brackett. Moore is perhaps the only author of the pulp era whose stories have elicited considerable critical discussion, although most such discussions do not take into account the full range of her work. Brackett's swashbuckling planetary adventures set in Mars and Venus attained immense contemporary popularity, earning her the title of "Queen of Space Opera," but neither this popularity nor the prodigious quantity of her SF output has translated into academic attention. Post-war SF writers such as Judith Merril, Katherine MacLean, and Margaret St. Clair went on to play an important role in facilitating the transition from the pulp form of magazine SF publishing to the digest form. These distinct but interconnected stages of women's participation in the early years of genre SF publishing are yet to be considered in their entirety, and research in these areas could meaningfully contribute to our understanding of a recognisable historical tradition of women's writing in the domain of science fiction.

Research Questions and Methodology:

In my thesis, I build on the existing scholarship of Jane Donawerth, Eric Leif Davin, Justine Larbalestier, Lisa Yaszek, Patrick B. Sharp, Brian Attebery and others who have, in the past three decades, unearthed and critically explored a rich corpus of SF by female writers in the pulp magazines. Davin's book *Partners in Wonder* provides exhaustive lists of stories published by women in the pulp magazines of the early twentieth century and dismisses the dominant stereotype that the world of pulp SF was a 'boys' club' that was

hostile to female inclusion.[7] Donawerth has highlighted how the women who wrote for the early pulps used SF as a literary medium for the imaginative exploration of other utopian worlds where revised gender and reproductive roles prevail, and where the burden of women's domestic labour is eased by a variety of technological interventions.[8] She has also examined other recurring tropes in SF, such as the figure of the alien as a representation of woman as Other.[9] Larbalestier has incorporated texts from the pulp magazines in her study on the battle of the sexes in science fiction, while Yaszek has focused on the field of mid-century women's writing that lies at the intersection of the pulp and digest SF traditions.[10] Patrick B. Sharp has read early pulp SF by women through the lens of "Darwinian feminism," a concept that encapsulates the attempts of late-nineteenth-century- and early-twentieth-century feminists to adopt a critical and woman-centred approach to evolutionary science and use Darwinian templates "for diagnosing the violence of patriarchal institutions that enslaved women."[11] Brian Attebery's important work on gender in SF has also played a formative role in my arguments.[12]

Through my research on American pulp SF by women, I sought to address a number of overlapping questions:

- Were contributions to pulp SF magazines by women consistent or sporadic? How were their contributions received by editors and readers?

[7] Davin, *Partners in Wonder*, 317–24.
[8] Jane L. Donawerth, "Science Fiction by Women in the Early Pulps, 1926–1930," in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, ed. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994).
[9] Jane Donawerth, *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997.
[10] Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Lisa Yaszek, *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008).
[11] Patrick B. Sharp, *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons and Women* (University of Wales Press, 2018), Introduction.
[12] Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

- What kinds of stories did women choose to tell through the medium of science fiction? How did their choice of subject matter and theme compare to that of their male counterparts?
- Did female authors represent the experiences, concerns, and subjective voices of women in their fiction, or did they merely attempt to ventriloquise male voices and thereby 'write like a man'?
- Did women engage with the socio-political and cultural discourses of their time in their writing? Was there a political or radical element to their writings, or did they largely endorse the status quo?
- How can we situate the women of the pulp era in the tradition of SF writing by women? Do their contributions change or modify our understanding of the field?

I chose gender and reproductive politics as the focal issues in my study due to their well-documented prominence in the history of women's SF. These twin concerns have historically connected women's SF writing with the domain of radical political activism, for by imagining alternative gender and reproductive arrangements in other worlds, female authors of SF could direct readers towards a critical appraisal of their own world and thereby foster a utopian impulse of hope and a desire to effect change. I have used the categories of gender and reproductive politics in a very broad sense in my analysis in order to accommodate a wide variety of overt and covert approaches to these issues in pulp SF by women.

Although I did not have direct access to physical pulp SF holdings, I benefited immensely from the painstaking efforts of the anonymous volunteers who have created virtually complete digital archives of pulp magazines on websites such as the Internet

Archive and the Luminist League over the last decade. These archives represent a veritable treasure trove for SF enthusiasts as they provide open access to previously neglected or undiscovered fiction, non-fiction, illustrations, scientific articles, letters, and a range of other resources from the pulp era. I used the comprehensive bibliography provided by Davin in *Partners in Wonder* to locate the specific magazine issues that contained writings by women. A wide range of magazines were examined in the process, such as *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *Wonder Stories* (including its predecessors *Science Wonder Stories* and *Air Wonder Stories*), *Planet Stories*, *Startling Stories*, and a variety of short-term quarterly publications. After going through the available primary texts, I narrowed down my selections to stories that seemed particularly interesting or innovative in their engagement with gender and reproductive issues. I was also able to identify certain recurring tropes or patterns that allowed me to group the primary texts into four distinct chapters, although many of these patterns overlapped across such restrictive boundaries in complex ways.

Chapter Overview:

My chapters are structured on the basis of a combination of chronology and theme. The first two chapters discuss a number of stories published around 1930 that reflect the general concerns articulated in women's SF of the Gernsback era. In fact, 1930 marked the apex of a particularly fertile period in the history of pulp SF by women, at a time when women were not only beginning to establish their presence in the world of the SF magazines as writers and readers but were also explicitly engaging with themes of gender and reproduction from a variety of perspectives. In my third and fourth chapters, I proceed to a consideration of women's writing in the Campbell era. The third chapter examines the

works of the two most celebrated female authors of SF's putative Golden Age: C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett. Here, the engagement with reproductive issues is more tangential than direct, but the stories yield fruitful readings due to their complex engagement with the gendered issues of identity, hybridity, and otherness. The final chapter focuses on authors who started publishing SF in Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction* in the post-war climate. Their works serve as a useful indicator of the kind of SF that would follow the decline of the pulps in the early 1950s. In each of the chapters, I attempt to cover diverse authors and texts in order to convey the plurality of styles and approaches that pulp SF could accommodate. I also relate each text to contemporary issues of socio-political relevance in order to determine the extent to which female pulp authors used SF as a tool for social analysis and criticism.

Chapter One: Filthy Creations: Illegitimate Reproduction and 'Mad' Science

In my first chapter, I study three stories published in 1930: Clare Winger Harris's "The Ape Cycle" (*Science Wonder Quarterly*, Spring 1930), Sophie Wenzel Ellis's "Creatures of the Light" (*Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, February 1930), and Kathleen Ludwick's "Dr. Immortelle" (*Amazing Stories Quarterly*, Fall 1930). The archetypal figure of the mad scientist features in each of these stories, demonstrating the authors' attempts to grapple with the complex legacy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In fact, Jane Donawerth has argued that the early female pulp pioneers "presented themselves as Frankenstein's daughters, alluding to Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein* in constituting their version of science fiction."[13] The mad scientists in these pulp narratives follow their fictional progenitor in tampering with the forbidden mysteries of life and creation and engendering monstrous offspring by illegitimately appropriating the female role in

[13] Donawerth, *Frankenstein's Daughters*, xviii.

reproduction. I argue that these stories offer a critique of the ethical transgressions and excesses of a masculinist science that eschews ethical considerations, forecloses female participation, and fails to take female concerns into account. In the process, I also discuss several scientific, socio-cultural, and political developments that were of topical significance in America in the early twentieth century.

Chapter Two: Utopian Elsewheres: Gender and Reproduction in the Pulp Herlands

My second chapter analyses the pulp utopian tradition through the study of three texts: Lilith Lorraine's "Into the 28th Century" (*Science Wonder Quarterly*, Winter 1930), M. F. Rupert's "Via the Hewitt Ray" (*Science Wonder Quarterly*, Spring 1930), and Leslie F. Stone's "The Conquest of Gola" (*Wonder Stories*, April 1931). The chapter illustrates how the utopian tradition of women's writing, despite suffering a decline in mainstream publishing from the 1920s onwards, survived in the pulp magazines well into the 1930s, with new SF tools in the authors' arsenals. My discussion in this chapter is founded on Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopianism as "a process of social dreaming," incorporating both the "eutopia" and the "dystopia" as mere variations of the utopian impulse, sharing a complementary rather than an antagonistic relationship.[14] I illustrate how each of the selected stories relates science and technology to issues of gender, sexuality, marriage, and reproduction in order to formulate a feminist vision of science that operates along the principles of cooperation and communitarianism. I also discuss how the texts defamiliarise gender and reproductive roles in an implicit critique of American gender relations in the early twentieth century. Each story is notable for its deployment of female narrative voices—a rare phenomenon in pulp SF.

[14] Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 3, 9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246.

Chapter Three: Alien Hybrids: From Reproduction to Regeneration

In my third chapter, I examine "Shambleau" (*Weird Tales*, November 1933) and "No Woman Born" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, December 1944) by C. L. Moore and "Terror Out of Space" (*Planet Stories*, Summer 1944) and "The Vanishing Venusians" (*Planet Stories*, Spring 1945) by Leigh Brackett in an attempt to study the complex, hybrid figure of the female alien in SF, situated at the intersection of the animal, the mechanical, and the vegetal. Robin Roberts describes the female alien as "pulp science fiction's legacy to feminists,"[15] while Patrick Parrinder notes how aliens in literature "invariably possess a metaphorical dimension" and serve to defamiliarise accepted constructions of gender and identity.[16] I proceed from these conceptual moorings to demonstrate how female authors of the Golden Age moved away from overt representations of gender and reproduction while also retaining these issues as SF subtext. I argue that Moore and Brackett use stories of alien encounters to challenge binary notions of gender difference and explore masculine anxieties about untamed female sexuality and reproductive autonomy. I also discuss how the aliens in the texts of Moore and Brackett resist assimilation into the heteronormative reproductive matrix, prompting a movement away from the discourse of organic reproduction and towards a Harawayan politics of cyborgian regeneration.[17]

Chapter Four: Domestic Experiments: Post-War Reproductive Mutations

My fourth chapter proceeds to magazine SF in the years after World War II, where we witness a constricted focus on the nuclear family and the sphere of domesticity, with its

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[15] Robin Roberts, *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 40.
[16] Patrick Parrinder, "The Alien Encounter: Or, Ms Brown and Mrs Le Guin," *Science Fiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (March 1979: 52, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239223.
[17] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

attendant emphasis on women's normative roles as household manager, wife, and mother. I read Judith Merril's "That Only a Mother" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, June 1948) and Katherine MacLean's "And Be Merry…" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, February 1950) through the lens of "galactic suburbia," a concept introduced by Joanna Russ and later developed by Lisa Yaszek to demonstrate how post-war SF often replicated conservative gender roles and relationships even in galactic settings. I follow Yaszek's lead in examining how post-war SF by women transformed the prevailing cult of domesticity into a terrain of ideological contestation. I also argue that Merril and MacLean used the imaginative tools of SF to critically examine, negotiate, challenge, and reformulate the domestic paradigm and its attendant gendered and reproductive assumptions from a feminist point of view. The subjective voices of the female protagonists again take centrestage in these narratives, owing to the authors' complex experimentation with narrative styles. The stories also engage with the post-war terrain of American psychiatry to examine the role it played in enforcing conformity and pathologising female deviations from established norms.

Conclusions:

The literary domain of pulp SF by women that is surveyed in this thesis is, by its very nature, heterogeneous and polymorphous, and therefore resistant to singular overarching conclusions. My attempt in this study was to highlight a plurality of forms, approaches, and concerns rather than to impose a single theoretical or critical framework on a varied body of texts simply because their authors were all women. Nevertheless, a generalised set of conclusions can be derived from this study of pulp SF by women. Each of the texts studied in the four chapters of the thesis evinces an active authorial engagement with current socio-political, scientific, and literary-cultural discourses, thereby debunking

the stereotype that the pulps merely offered mindless entertainment detached from reality. Lorraine writes openly about the dream of socialist revolution; Rupert refers directly to the contemporary feminist movement; Stone boldly critiques the twin values of militarism and imperialism; Ludwick alludes to the birth control campaign; Moore explores the contours of the technologically mediated body; and Merril offers a woman's perspective on the presumed "wonders" of the Atomic Age. All these stories manifest an inherently political outlook through their female-centred critiques of the masculinist scientific tradition and their attempts to formulate alternative, proto-feminist models of science and social relations founded on utopian and communitarian principles. The foregrounding of female narrative voices and the presentation of female characters in traditionally male-dominated fields are also politically charged decisions.

Most importantly, female pulp SF authors do not shy away from the exploration of issues that are of special relevance to women, even as they work within the demands of a genre that conventionally privileges masculine domains of activity and interest. Their stories conceptualise imaginative elsewheres where gender equality has been achieved, or where women are the dominant social group. Such thought-experiments allow them to suitably revise gender roles and thereby encourage the readers to conduct a corresponding scrutiny of the patriarchal status quo. Female pulp authors also frequently introduce a host of gender and reproductive concerns such as procreation, sexuality, pregnancy, marriage, motherhood, nutrition and childcare, and domesticity into their fiction. They are simultaneously able to defamiliarise and reconstruct these categories through the presentation of alternative gendered/reproductive arrangements and even artificial reproductive technologies. The stories that present encounters with the archetypal SF other—the alien—work to unsettle deep-seated preconceptions regarding gender identity, embodiment, and subjectivity and are often remarkably astute in identifying the social

constructions that govern hegemonic ideologies and hierarchies of gender. Pulp SF by women is also alert to the fractured gender(ed) relations that operate within and without the intimate domestic space of the home. The strategies they adopt to cement the female presence in SF draw from the older utopian tradition and both enable and anticipate the second-wave feminist metamorphosis of the genre.