Real Mothers, a Faggot Uncle, and the Name of the Father: Samuel R. Delany's Feminist Revisions of the Story of SF

by

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The stories a discipline or genre tells about itself reflect its values and anxieties as well as determine the shapes and even limits of its future.[1] Four particularly vexed nodes of controversy pervade the stories that writers, critics, and fans tell about science fiction, surfacing constantly in its discourse at cons, in print publications, and online, particularly in the SF blogosphere. These four points of controversy include a preoccupation with the question of SF's legitimacy; an obsession with establishing a monolithic definition of sex texts for patrolling the genre's border; the search for a definitive story of SF's origins and lineage; and the failure to integrate the work of women into the genre's narratives about itself. Over the years, Samuel R. Delany has weighed in on all four; but to date, his analyses bearing on them have not been significantly heeded, perhaps because doing so would entail a radically different way of thinking and talking about the genre. In this paper I will discuss these points of controversy and then examine Delany's insights into them and his outline for a radically different story of SF that would lay these issues to eternal rest.

The first two points of controversy seem to be permanent features of the landscape for most writers, fans, and critics of SF; hardly a day goes by when one or the other of them is not hotly discussed in the SF blogosphere.[2] Although the legitimacy and definition and labeling issues are typically treated as separate, they are implicitly connected. On the one hand, anxiety about the perceived illegitimacy of science fiction vis-à-vis "mainstream literature," (as it is called in the genre) and, often, ressentiment toward those who dismiss SF as a "ghetto" frequently manifest themselves in attempts by fans and writers to exclude and expel and keep tight control over definitions and labels. On the other hand, groups of writers within the genre often create new labels for characterizing their own and their friends' fiction, either to position it as a high(ly) literary—and thus more legitimate—exploitation of the forms of SF, or to distinguish it as radically new and more sophisticated than previous SF texts. Similarly, critics, as Delany noted in his "Exhortation to SF Scholars," use the proposal of a system of definition "as an initializing mark of mastery that

empowers all further discourse to proceed"—as critics "in every other area of literary-critical studies" rarely do. ("Exhortation" 5)

In the US from the 1920s through the early 1950s, SF was published chiefly in pulp magazines and comics. In his introduction to *Microcosmic God*, Vol.2 of Theodore Sturgeon's collected stories, Delany quotes Sturgeon's account of how his step-father, Argyll, reacted when young Ted bought his first SF magazine (a 1933 issue of *Astounding*):

> I brought it home and Argyll pounced on it as I came in the door. "Not in *my* house!" he said, and scooped it off my schoolbooks and took it straight into the kitchen and put it in the garbage and put the cover on. "That's what we do with garbage," and he sat back down at his desk and my mother at the end of it and their drink. ("Forward" xxii)

Delany attributes Argyll's attitude, that SF is trash, to the "moral rigidities" of the pre-World War II era, when pulp magazines and comics were viewed as a "pernicious influence of an evil antiart."(xxiii) Delany notes that when in 1946, "on the other side of the Second World War," his parents found him reading a Batman comic, although his father was appalled, comics "were allowed in the house with only comparatively minimal policing." (xxiii)

The genre may have produced a significant number of what Jonathan Lethem calls "Great Books" in the decades since Argyll Sturgeon characterized SF as "garbage," but for many, the attitude that SF is "trash" has apparently not altered significantly. When in early 2006 David Izkoff, the new science fiction reviewer for the *New York Times,* published his first review along with a reading list titled "Science Fiction for the Ages" that he said was a list of personal favorites, he expressed a sense of shame about being seen to read SF in public. What "truly shames me," he writes, "is that I cannot turn to any of these people [fellow passengers on the subway], or to my friends, or to you, and say… you should pick up this new work of science fiction I just finished reading, because you will enjoy it as much as I did." *Shame* seems a peculiarly strong choice of word, given the explanation he offers:

> I cannot do this in good conscience because if you were to immerse yourself in most of the sci-fi being published these days, you would probably enjoy it as much as one enjoys reading a biology textbook or a stereo manual. And you would very

> likely come away wondering, as I do from time to time, whether science fiction has strayed so far from the fiction category as a whole that, though the two share common ancestors, they now seem to have as much to do with each other as a whale has to do with a platypus. ("Geek to Me")

Although some welcomed the possibility that the *New York Times Book Review* actually intended to publish a regular SF column rather than the occasional short piece by Gerald Jonas the *Times* had previously allotted to SF, the language, tone, and underlying assumptions implicit in Itzkoff's first column provoked controversy in the SF blogosphere.[3] SF writers, critics, and fans have an acute sensitivity to the anxieties attending ghetto status, and few missed the peculiarity of Itzkoff's use of the word *shame,* which rendered his apparent anxieties about being associated with the genre stark and—for some—even offensive. Mathew Cheney, for instance, not only mocks Itzkoff's anxieties—

> I have a hard time mustering up much of a response beyond, "Boo, hoo," because if the poor boy is wandering through the subways in search of "social standing" for the books he reads, there's no hope for him at all and he needs to get one of those expensive Manhattan shrinks to work through it with him. (Cheney, March 5, 2006)

but also parses the passage quoted above to expose the nature of Itzkoff's anxieties:

> So there are two things in the world, "fiction" and things that are unreadable by people on subway cars. There is also this person called *you*, and *you* don't enjoy reading biology textbooks or stereo manuals. This is a marvelous move, because here the equation is "you = Dave Itzkoff" and so the insecure writer has turned the world into himself. Clearly, his inner child, disappointed with the world, is acting up.
>
> The implication here is that *you* is not a "geek," which is what a person who enjoys such novels as *Counting Heads* is. Geeks are outsiders, they are not normal, they exist on the margins, they are part of a freakshow, they have no social standing or

> political clout, and they don't read the *New York Times.* And they're taking over the world and making science fiction unsafe for the rest of us.
>
> Except the thing Itzkoff calls "science fiction" (or "sci fi") doesn't exist. It doesn't exist as an opposite to the ridiculous "fiction" category he creates (since that doesn't exist, either), and it doesn't exist because all sorts of things get published as science fiction… I'm not denying there isn't plenty of SF that is, well, geeky. It's not the stuff that appeals to me, but I actually admire it a lot…Why should it have to be as appealing to the masses as *The Da Vinci Code?* This is to confuse quality with popularity, and that's a deadly confusion. (Cheney, March 5, 2006)

Cheney goes on to examine Itzkoff's list of his ten favorite SF books, noting that it includes nothing "geeky" (or "hard"), and expresses amusement that "Itzkoff's choices and preferences suggest he is as crippled by nostalgia as the people who complain that SF hasn't been any good since the death of John W. Campbell." To me, however, Itzkoff's list suggests something rather different (besides sexist ignorance of work by women writers). Apart from *The Twilight Zone Companion,* his list carefully selects titles that have the status of being "classics" or are written by authors who've achieved recognition in mainstream literary circles (works of the sort Delany characterizes as "borderline cases" in his *Diacritics* interview): Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz;* Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle;* Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange;* Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49;* Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, with Occasional Music: A Novel;* China Miéville's *Looking for Jake;* Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle;* Ray Bradbury's *R is for Rocket;* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen.* Rather than being simply non-"geeky," Itzkoff's list reflects a desperate wish to exhibit sufficient distinction in his taste to disavow the very stigmatization Cheney mocks him for fretting over.

There's nothing novel in Itzkoff's tactic: it resembles another tactic deployed by SF critics to render SF legitimate, viz., that of drafting works of high literature that are "borderline" SF into the SF canon with the hope of redeeming it. Novels like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go,* Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,* Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore,* Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tail,* Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, George Orwell's *1984,*

though arguably science-fictional (especially when judged by the criteria of one or another formal definition of SF), are not usually shelved in the SF sections of bookstores and were not themselves written with reference to other works of SF. While it makes sense to consider such novels as works of genre to the extent that they bear an intertextual relation to works of SF, because such novels have high prestige and recognition value outside the genre, critics often tend to claim them as markers demonstrating the worth and value of works of science fiction regardless of their provenance or significance for the genre.

But just as SF critics wish to identify high literary work as SF to win respectability of the genre by association, so do high literary critics wish to identify brilliant works of SF as literary and dissociate them from the genre. Thus, when an SF author who has been clearly associated with the genre produces work that achieves recognition in the literary sphere, critics claim that the work "transcends" the genre. A typical example can be found in Steve Erickson's interview of Delany in *Black Clock*:

> A lot of your work, particularly in the late Sixties and going into the Seventies, seemed intended both to transcend the conventions of science fiction and at the same time to embrace what we'll call, for lack of something better, the "mainstream." But as your biographies have it, you grew up not necessarily reading a lot of science fiction but a lot of more classical literature. (Erickson, 73)

Erickson's question is clearly meant to prompt Delany to disavow not only his classification as an SF writer but also the influence SF has had on his fiction. Delany responds by talking about how emotionally powerful his experiences reading SF as a child were. A few questions later, Erickson tries again: "So you didn't feel caught up by a dual impulse to transcend the genre on the one hand and embrace it on the other." This time Delany overtly attempts to set Erickson straight:

> Transcending the genre? At best it's a conventional—*and* somewhat hyperbolic—way to refer to the writer's unusual contribution to the genre itself. But the SF novelist who wants to do something really good and new is no more trying to *transcend* the SF genre than the literary novelist who wants to write a really good and

> new literary novel is trying to transcend literature. In both cases it's a matter of trying to live up to the potential of the genre. (Erickson, 75)

Delany then expands on the notion of living up to the potential of the genre in which one is writing. Nevertheless, Erickson's anxieties about Delany's association with the SF ghetto apparently prevent him from grasping Delany's point, for he's unable to let the matter drop. So he tries once again:

> OK. Let's give this dead horse one more whack. It doesn't seem such a coincidence that *Dhalgren* and *Gravity's Rainbow* were written pretty much during the same period of time. We could say the line between "science fiction" and "mainstream" was being attacked from different sides by both books. (Erickson 76)

Delany responds by agreeing with the last sentence, but insists, "To repeat myself, genre distinctions are fundamentally power boundaries." And he goes on to note that "exclusionary attitudes are part of the history of science fiction….Those exclusionary forces rigorously shaped the space in which the rhetorical richness, invention and genius of SF was forced to flower." (76) In other words, a genre is a location with a history—and not simply a slot with a label.

Jonathan Lethem, who spent years working in the genre before "breaking out" into the mainstream, shares Erickson's interest in dismantling "the line" between "science fiction and mainstream." In an essay first published in 1998, Lethem "dreams" of "utopian reconfiguration of the publishing, bookselling, and reviewing apparatus" that would dismantle the "barrier" between "genre" and "mainstream" fiction:

> The 1973 Nebula Award *should* have gone to *Gravity's Rainbow,* the 1976 Award to *Ratner's Star.* Soon after, the notion of "science fiction" ought to have been gently and lovingly dismantled, and the writers dispersed: children's fantasists here, hardware-fetish thriller writers here, novelizers of films both-real-and-imaginary here. Most important, a ragged handful of heroically enduring and ambitious speculative fabulators should have embarked for the rocky realms of midlist, out-

> of-category fiction. And there—don't wake me now, I'm fond of this one—they should have been welcomed. (Lethem, 9)

"Speculative fabulation," Lethem informs us, was "a lit-crit term both pretentiously silly and dead right," conceived "in a seizure of ambition," when SF "flirted with renaming itself."(1) Lethem's principal complaint is that "SF's literary writers exist now in a twilight world, neither respectable nor commercially viable." If SF can't be merged with the mainstream, then what is needed, he argues, is to find a way to make work that gets categorized as SF legitimate by keeping it from "drowning in a sea of garbage in bookstores," by presenting "its own best face, to win proper respect."[4] (Lethem, 8)

A similar tactic to that of drafting literary works into the SF canon is that of inventing new labels designed to blur the genre distinctions Delany characterizes as "power boundaries," with the aim of placing the more literary or "softer" SF within a boundary zone into which can be drafted literary work with fantastic or SFnal elements. The term "Speculative Fiction" or "Spec Fic" dates back to 1947, when first Heinlein used it, but began to be used in the 1970s to imply an SF work's superior quality to other science fiction; the US version of the term "New Wave" dates back to the mid-1960s; and the term "slipstream," which many people say Bruce Sterling coined, became popular in the late 1980s and continues to be bandied about to this day. The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw an attempt to distinguish the "postmoderns," which according to Michael Swanwick were comprised of a "natural division" between "humanists" and "cyberpunks"[5]; while in the late 1990s, a group of Fantasy writers led by Fantasy of Manners writer Ellen Kushner (who earlier coined the term "Mannerpunk") attempted to create "a new literary movement" called the "Young Trollopes." More recently, various cliques (or "tribes") of fantasy and SF writers have attempted to create designations for their own use that inevitably fail through an inability to establish or control essential definitions. These include "interstitial fiction," "the New Weird," "infernokrusher," "New Fabulism" and even "New Wave Fabulism."[6] While all these attempts to distinguish a few genre texts from all others do not necessarily aim to confer literary legitimacy on their beneficiaries, they are, like the oldest, most pervasive label—"hard SF"—manifestations of the anxieties of the genre's lack of legitimacy.

If all of these labels have a history of running aground on the rocks of definitional disputes, that is likely because, as Delany points out, definition is associated with mastery. "Genres, discourses, and genre collections are all social objects," he declares, drawing on Lucien Goldmann's *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, and social objects resist formal definition:

> Social objects are those that, instead of existing as a relatively limited number of material objects, exist rather as an unspecified number of recognition codes (functional descriptions, if you will) shared by an unlimited population, in which new and different examples are regularly produced….And when a discourse (or genre collection, such as art) encourages, values, and privileges originality, creativity, variation, and change in its new examples, it should be self-evident why "definition" is an impossible task (since the object itself, if it is healthy, is constantly developing and changing), even for someone who finds it difficult to follow the fine points. ("Politics" 239)

In "The Politics of the Paraliterary" Delany focuses on Darko Suvin as an example of the misguided critic hellbent on establishing a formal definition of science fiction, but in his "Exhortation to SF Scholars" Delany generalizes this insistence on establishing a formal definition of SF as a preoccupation of many of the academic critics who choose to study SF. What all the attempts have in common, he observes, "is a bottom-line absolute, a zero-degree of authoritative empowerment—the credential that allows the master to speak and that authenticates its speech—that drops out of the bottom of the argument, as it were, and 'grounds' it, without ever actually entering into it." ("Exhortation," 4)

Not surprisingly, those anxious to preserve SF's "purity" set the definitions narrowly, so as to exclude (or make tenuous) fiction that is not sufficiently "hard" enough,[7] while many at the "literary" end of the SF spectrum, anxious to have their work read without the prejudice of the SF label, frequently invent new terms in the hope that their work's affinity with literary texts will help it stand out from the genre's "sea of garbage" (as Lethem puts it). Both of these tactics, though fundamentally at odds, seem to be driven by the same sense of frustration and the same impulse to take control of a messy situation through semantic mastery.

The third point of controversy pervading the stories that critics, writers, and fans tell about SF is the search for origins and the establishment of lineage, centering on the questions of who wrote the first texts of science fiction and how the field was subsequently shaped. How a critic answers these questions usually hinges on how the critic defines science fiction. While the need to create a monumental history typically involves investing the genre with the cultural capital of widely recognized literary ancestors, doing so is usually of more importance to the genre's critics and writers than to its fans. According to Delany, science fiction writers

> have been proposing origins for our genre since the late thirties, when the game of origin hunting became important to early critics first interested in contemporary popular culture. The various proposals made over the years are legion: Wells, Verne, and Poe, in that order, have the most backers. There were more eccentric ones (my personal favorite is Edward Sylvester Ellis's *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, a dime novel from 1865, whose fifteen-year-old inventor hero builds a ten-foot steam-powered robot, who can pull a horseless carriage along behind him at nearly sixty miles an hour…and more conservative ones (Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, 1629; Joannes Kepler's *Somnium* [written 1609, published 1634]; Savinien Cyrano's [de Bergerac] *Voyage to the Moon* and *The States and Empires of the Sun*[1650]*)*, and slightly loopy ones (Shakespeare's *Tempest*; Dante's *Commedia*), and some classical ones (Lucian of Samosata's *True History*, from the second century A.D., which recounts a voyage to the moon)…. When Brian Aldiss's history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction,* first appeared from Doubleday in 1973 (from page one of Chapter One: "As a preliminary, we need a definition of science fiction…"), one might have assumed that the argument filling its opening chapter, proposing *Frankenstein* as our new privileged origin, was another eccentric suggestion among many—and would be paid about as much attention to as any of these others. ("Politics" 263)

But Aldiss's new definition of SF and new origins story had legs, for it was regarded by "academics who saw their own fields of literary study rocked by the advent of theory" as

> a weighty sandbag on a breakwater against the rising theoretical tide. For the rest, they tended to accept the argument simply because it received a certain amount of attention from these others. Among writers and those not directly concerned with the theoretical debates, there was still a vague presentiment that such singular origins somehow authorized and legitimated a contemporary practice of writing, or that its feminist implications made it attractive. ("Politics" 266)

The origins controversy did not die with Aldiss's proposal of Mary Shelley as the Founder of Science Fiction. As recently as 1998, In *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*, Thomas Disch claimed Edgar Allan Poe as the first SF writer. Certainly most US writers and critics prefer not to trace SF's lineage back to someone who is a Brit, a woman, and a romantic. For as Delany insists: "The origin is *always* a political construct." ("Politics," 266) And so the battle rages on.

The fourth point of controversy attending the stories told about SF, one which arises virtually daily in the blogosphere and more and more frequently in published reviews, is the failure to integrate the work of women into the genre's stories of itself. Women had a presence in the genre's early pulp magazines. But as Justine Larbalestier's *Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* shows, for decades, the very presence of women in the genre caused controversy. Many fans (including the young Isaac Asimov) argued vociferously that even women characters had no business intruding into the sacred male precincts of SF. The domination of the genre by brilliant work by women in the 1970s, however, as well as effective feminist organization in fandom, eventually silenced overt protests against the presence of women in the male-dominated clubhouse. But although women are now fully accredited members of the genre's community, the position of women continues to demonstrate a failure to integrate the work of women into the genre, thus assuring their continuing marginality. This failure usually takes the form of reducing women writers to an exceptional or token presence by offering a separate account of them that relegates them to the margins and overlooks their contributions to the genre's main stories. This last issue concerns mainly women writers and critics and the men who make an effort to support them. Since the presence of women in the field has expanded enormously over the last couple of decades, I believe it is an issue that will become increasingly visible and vexing to everyone. Lately I've been struck by just how many men in the field would genuinely like to

see the problem solved—even as they express incomprehension for why it should still be a problem when outright expressions of sexism have become rare.

Certain of Delany's insights and analyses, taken to their logical conclusion, would require the creation of a radically different story of SF, one that would fully integrate the work of the genre's women even as it dismisses, for good, the preoccupation with legitimacy, the search for a definitive story of SF's origins and lineage, and the obsession with establishing a monolithic definition of SF texts for patrolling the genre's borders. Although the issue that concerns me most is the seeming impossibility of the genre's fully integrating science fiction by women into the stories it tells about itself, Delany's take on these four issues has persuaded me that they are intertwined and perhaps even inextricable.

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In 1987, during an interview with Delany, Takayuki Tatsumi proposed a reconstruction of "American SF history" reflecting the momentary dominance of the field by cyberpunk.[8] His reconstruction sketches a patrilineal narrative that begins with Bester (who produced his best work in the 1950s), proceeds to Delany (who began publishing in the early 1960s and whose most widely admired works of SF appeared in the 1970s and early 1980s) and Varley (whose best work appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s), and culminates with William Gibson, the 1980's SF heir apparent. Shortly before Tatsumi proposed this reconstruction, Delany cited Jeanne Gomoll's "Open Letter to Joanna Russ" and asserted that the "feminist explosion" of the 1970s had "obviously influenced" the cyberpunks and had done so "much more than the New Wave" had.[9] Although this was an utterly astonishing contention, Delany's 1987 interlocutor not only ignored it, but even went on to confer patriarchal status on Delany. Whatever Tatsumi's reason for doing so might be, this move elicited a fascinating reply from Delany.

Rather than allowing the interviewer to make an end-run around his refusal to play along with a boys' own narrative of cyberpunk SF family relations, Delany expanded on his astonishing idea of feminist influence by countering the interviewer's proposed patrilineage with a completely different narrative of family relations. He started by zooming in on a certain preoccupation he calls the "anxious search for fathers":

> When you look at the criticism cyberpunk has generated, you notice among the male critics this endless, anxious search for fathers—that

> finally just indicates the general male discomfort with the whole notion of paternity. Which, in cyberpunk, is as it should be. Cyberpunk is, at basis, a bastard form of writing. It doesn't have a father. Or, rather, it has so many that enumerating them just doesn't mean anything. ("Mothers," 177)

In the more than twenty years since Delany characterized cyberpunk as "a bastard form of writing," this "anxious search for fathers" continues. Critics continually propose this father or that for defining, placing, and—if Delany is correct—legitimating cyberpunk. A recent version can be found in John Clute's chapter describing SF from 1980-2000, in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003); Clute names Vernor Vinge as the "godfather" of cyberpunk and describes Vinge's "True Names" and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* as the "mulch of influences" from which Gibson created the particular metaphor of cyberspace. Mulch, like fertilizer, enriches the soil. And fathers, as we know, provide sperm that is said to "fertilize" eggs. Surely the metaphor of fertilization is a rather strange way of describing the joining of gametes that results in the recombination of genetic material, but then many of the metaphors that dominate biological discourse are similarly strange. "Mulch" is a more discreet choice of metaphor than "godfather," though it suggests a more material connection than "godfather." A "godfather" is, strictly speaking, a spiritual—as opposed to biological—father, but as a compound, to the ear, anyway, it seems to mix up paternity with godhood.

Interestingly, the anxiety about fathers that Delany cites differs markedly from that of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," which depicts literary sons as in an oedipal relation to their literary fathers. The "endless, anxious search" for the fathers of cyberpunk that Delany talks about bears little relation to Bloom's theory of an anxiety involving a single literary father. I suspect this is because oedipal relations arise from a distinctly bourgeois psychological formation in which legitimacy is not at issue. As Delany characterizes cyberpunk as a "bastard form of writing," so I would suggest that science fiction generally is a bastard form of writing—and for the same reason Delany gives: it has too many fathers.[10] And having too many fathers, Delany says, means that enumerating them "just doesn't mean anything."

Well, perhaps it is also the case that the concept of paternity doesn't mean a thing for science fiction as a whole, either. Just consider how irrelevant Bloom's anxiety of influence is for figuring generations of SF writers. Who are the patriarchal figures of the field? Not

Wells. Not Asimov. Not Clarke. Not Sturgeon. Not even Heinlein, who has inspired both rebellion and devotion yet simply does not constitute a credible embodiment of the Law. The patriarchs, if there are any, would have to be Gernsback and Campbell, both editors, and however powerful, editors cannot, as editors, figure in the kind of lineage Tatsumi proposes.[11] To my mind, the sibling model has always dominated relations among science fiction writers, such that influence is often lateral. And this, too, marks a difference from the Bloomian model. Perhaps more importantly, the texts of science fiction are so constantly in conversation with one another that the welter of relations involved is simply too promiscuous to be reduced to a lineage. I love this aspect of science fiction myself, but I suspect that for all those who prize the values of monogamy and the model of the heteronormative nuclear family, this is a sorry state of affairs that generates the very anxiety Delany attributes to the early critics of cyberpunk. Such anxiety might well explain why critics of science fiction in general spend so much of their energy trying to establish the true patrilineage of the field.

After declaring that cyberpunk has too many fathers so that "enumerating them just doesn't mean anything," Delany further unfolds his figure of family relations:

> What it's got are mothers. A whole set of them—who, in literary terms, were so promiscuous that their cyberpunk offspring will simply never be able to settle down, sure of a certain daddy. ("Mothers," 177)

As a woman writer and a feminist, I find myself wondering whether *any* man writer has ever named a woman writer or women writers as his literary mother(s) or primary influence. When has a critic—other than Delany—ever proposed such an attribution? Except perhaps in the romance and mystery genres, the line of literary descent for men writers is never traced *directly* through women. While a few science fiction critics—most of them British—have followed Brian Aldiss's lead in claiming Mary Shelley as the first science fiction writer and thus as the mother of science fiction, they do not name her as a chief influence on a particular man writer. As a long-dead progenitor, Mary Shelley carries a certain cultural capital that can be claimed without fear of emasculation. But that's a far cry from putting her into the direct lineage.

"I'm a favorite faggot 'uncle,'" Delany continues,

> who's always looked out for mom and who, when they were young, showed the kids some magic tricks. But I have no more claim to a position on the direct line of descent than any other male writer. Sometimes they like to fantasize I do. But that's just because they used to like me before they knew anything about real sex.
> To the extent that they can accept mom and their bastard status—which I think Gibson does—these writers produce some profoundly interesting and elegant work. ("Mothers," 177)

Over the years, in interview after interview, Delany has repeatedly countered his interlocutors' insistence that his work be extracted from the various paraliteratures he has contributed to. For one thing, he has held that the parameters of a genre are determined not by its texts, but by the protocols of reading; and for another, he has argued that the desire for legitimacy is a snare and delusion that fundamentally misunderstands the operations of discourse. But *here,* deploying this figure of familial relations, Delany links the issue of legitimacy with the constant, mostly tacit refusal to acknowledge the presence and influence of work by women. This presence and influence, he suggests, creates anxiety. And that anxiety is all wrapped up with the problem of not being able to find and name the father. I believe this gives us a better understanding for why Bruce Sterling and others in the original Cyberpunk Movement so strenuously denied for much of the 1990s that cyberpunk with a small "c"—a good deal of which has been written by women—wasn't the *true* cyberpunk, since *real* cyberpunk had existed only for a very brief window in the mid-1980s. And I would argue that this desire to narrowly define and limit cyberpunk parallels the unending brawl that goes on in fan and academic circles alike about what science fiction is—as though if only we could decide on a single, clear definition of what makes a text science fiction, then science fiction could finally boast its own proper name, the product of a single patrilineage rather than the non-bourgeois family Delany describes. Science fiction, Delany's remarks on cyberpunk have convinced me, can *only* be a bastard form of writing because an unambiguous, unitary definition of what makes science fiction science fiction, which would be necessary for establishing legitimacy, is impossible.

In concluding his elaboration of cyberpunk's bastard status, Delany restates the importance of the link:

> To the extent they rebel against them—and the one point [Jeanne] Gomoll couldn't seem to make was that this search for fathers is part of the *same* legitimating move that ignores mothers—the work becomes at its best conservative and at its worst rhubarbative[sic]—if not downright tedious. ("Mothers," 177)

Here Delany has come full circle, returning to Jeanne Gomoll's "An Open Letter to Joanna Russ," a manifesto challenging Bruce Sterling's erasure of the flowering of feminist SF in the 1970s, which he mentioned immediately before Tatsumi proposed his patrilineal reconstruction of SF. The first few times I read this, although I exulted that Delany had read Gomoll sympathetically, I grasped only part of it, the part that I already knew. Gomoll's "Open Letter" asserted that Bruce Sterling's characterization of late 1970s SF as "confused, self-involved, and stale" marked the first sign of feminist SF's erasure from SF history. And indeed, his brief remark in the manifesto that is his introduction to Gibson's collection of short fiction, *Burning Chrome*, to anyone who did not already know that SF of the 1970s was dominated by feminist SF, would lead the casual reader to assume that not only did nothing interesting happen in the genre during those years, but also that cyberpunk was rebelling against something that was not in fact radically new. If Sterling had deigned to name feminist SF as what cyberpunk was rebelling against, the reader would have been left to wonder if the cyberpunks were about as revolutionary as the contemporaneous Reagan-supported contras who were also rebelling against a 1970s revolution. But since Sterling does not name names, the reader is not invited to link "confused, self-involved, and stale" with what Delany calls "the explosion of feminist SF," and the manifesto instead follows the ancient pattern feminist scholars know well, the pattern that has repeatedly resulted in eliminating the work of women from historical memory.

Or, as Delany puts it, the manifesto ignores cyberpunk's mothers. "You're omitting," he's just told his interviewer,

> the Russ/Le Guin, McIntyre, and [Joan] Vinge axis, without which there wouldn't *be* any cyberpunk. Is it this macho uncertainty that keeps on trying to make us black out the explosion that lights the whole cyberpunk movement? without which we wouldn't be able to read it? without which there would not be either the returning macho or the female cyberpunk characters who stand up to it? ("Mothers," 177)

Here Delany cites two kinds of relations between cyberpunk and feminist SF, one positive or productive, the other reactionary or negative. Easiest to grasp is his claim for the positive relation, such that cyberpunk's production of Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer* and other female characters like her needed the rich development of female characterization found in feminist SF of the 1970s.[12] The second kind of relation that Delany notes, the negative or reactionary, I did not immediately grasp. Delany's perception, here, is informed by Nietzsche's insight, developed by Foucault and Derrida among others, that mere rebellion is in a profound sense reactionary, necessarily reiterating and reinforcing the very terms one wishes to escape. And so, given the inherent structure of rebellion—viz., that it is dependent on and is in some sense generated by the very thing it opposes—to the extent that cyberpunk rebels against its mothers, Delany is saying, cyberpunk's "returning macho" renders the work conservative, possibly rebarbative, and perhaps even downright "tedious."

Gibson, Delany says, "is the one who most responds to the recent (and by no means completed) feminist history of our genre, and in an extraordinarily creative way—in a way similar to the way that Varley responds to it, too. Shirley and Sterling might take a lesson." Delany then elaborates on the positive influence of feminist SF in facing up to what he characterizes as the crucial test of all novels: the creation of believable women characters.

I would like to back up here, to return to the parenthetical remark Delany made when talking about the conservatism of the "returning macho." "The one point that Gomoll couldn't seem to make," he says, "was that this search for fathers is part of the *same* legitimating move that ignores mothers." This "one point" that Delany speaks of, of course, is the most extraordinary point of the entire interview. Even if Jeanne Gomoll had been able to make that "one point" back in 1986, it may be that Samuel R. Delany would have been the only reader to get it. But it's a point that I think some of us are now ready to get, a point, if taken to heart, that could change the stories we tell about SF profoundly. First, the

continual marginalization of the work of SF by women in accounts of SF by critics, writers, and fans has more to do with the genre's anxious desire for legitimacy and need to disavow the bastard status of SF than with any actual marginality of that work to the genre. Second, critics' endless, impossible wish to construct a monumental history that everyone will recognize and defer to is another form of the genre's endless, anxious search for fathers in particular and legitimacy in general. I have elsewhere argued against creating a monumental history of feminist SF in favor of pursuing what Foucault and Deleuze calls "genealogies," which are not lineages, but multifarious connections establishing wild relations between works that might have only the most tenuous of generational connections. It strikes me that an SF criticism more interested in pursuing such genealogies than in constructing the foundations and building blocks of a monumental history would be considerably more interesting and revealing—though it obviously wouldn't allay the anxiety of those obsessed with constructing a legitimate line of literary descent through unquestioned generations of fathers. And finally, if the genre were able to rid itself of its anxious concern with legitimacy, the constant bickering over defining the particular quality or elements of an SF text would cease.

Why do I say that I think many of us are ready now to take Delany's point? I was greatly heartened reading *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction,* edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, which was published in 2003. In her introduction to the volume, which seeks to give an overview of the history of science fiction, Mendlesohn declines to define SF, except to say that it is "less a genre than an ongoing discussion…SF is a built genre. It is its history." Second, the anthology, for the most part, takes little interest in the legitimacy issue. Third, many of its chapters attempt to integrate the work of women into its discussion—and although the chapters that don't integrate SF by women treat women writers as irrelevant to the main discussion, they at least *mention* more than only one or two token women, as critics who cannot bring themselves to see women as ever having seriously influenced the development of the genre normally do.

The title of this paper speaks of "the story of SF," but Delany would be the first to tell us that there is no one single story of SF; my use of "story" is plural in spirit. What sort of stories do I imagine could be told were SF critics to value the pearls Delany has been casting our way for the last quarter of a century? Let me offer a few examples. Were critics to accept the challenge implicit in his reference to "the crucial test of a novel" (that is,

creating plausible female characters), surely one of the stories about SF that would demand to be told would entail an account identifying SF writers for whom the writing of *novels*—in the sense Delany intends—has been important, and how and why it became so, and what formal difficulties the writers faced in forging an SF novel, and so on. Such a question would demand a genealogical rather than monumental approach to SF history; and surely an analysis that did not integrate the work of women writers into its main discussion would strike everyone as peculiar.

Another possible story to tell about SF would take up the important aesthetic question of how affect works in SF. In his *Black Clock* interview, Delany says "that one thing that makes Sturgeon such a great writer is that he's not afraid to risk sentimentality. He's not *afraid* of that big emotional gesture."(Erickson, 74) As Delany continually insists, science fiction is *different* from literature, and one of the things critics need to be doing is seeking to elucidate those differences. Is the place of the "big emotional gesture" different in science fiction than it is in mainstream literature? Given the difference in the treatment of subjectivity and psychology in science fiction from that typical of literature, it would seem likely. I think learning something about that difference could provide powerful insight into the aesthetics of SF.

A third example: in Delany's *Diacritics* interview, he asserts that like minor literature, paraliterature "refracts, contests, and agonizes with this other 'unbiased' literature, calls it to task, puts it in question, and, with violence, appropriates, desecrates, ignores, falls victim to and brilliantly recuts the multiple facets of its conventions." (213) Delany alludes to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s noting this of black literature; and certainly feminist critics have devoted considerable attention to this relation of women's writing to so-called "unbiased literature." But of course in order for critics to pay attention to this relation in SF texts, they would first need to put aside their collective anxiety over legitimacy.

Perhaps Delany's most comprehensive suggestion for creating richer, more interesting stories about SF is his proposal, in his *Paradoxa* interview "Inside and Outside the Canon," for a methodology for studying paraliterary genres that emphasizes the material productions of their discourse. Delany notes that "we need lots of biography, history, reader-response research—and we need to look precisely at how these material situations influenced the way texts (down to individual rhetorical features) were (and are) read. In short, we need to generate these markers from a *sophisticated* awareness of the values already

in circulation among the readership at the time these works entered the public market." (*About Writing,* 359) What would such a study look like? Well, I think a first step toward it would look something like Larbalestier's *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction.*

Indisputably, Delany has helped feminists to revise the stories *they* tell about science fiction. The only real question for me is whether these revisions will ever be integrated into the main body of science fiction criticism and permanently change the kinds of stories the genre of science fiction tells about itself.

Notes

1. My thanks to Josh Lukin for his thoughtful reading of an earlier version of this paper and his excellent suggestions for rewriting it.

2. There have been exceptions, but they are rare. Alan DeNiro's "The Dream of the Unified Field" stands out (and explicitly recognizes Delany's exhortations against formal, rigorous attempts to define science fiction).

3. A range of reactions can be found in the March 2006 archive of *Locus Online*'s letter column. Numerous blogs also featured discussed Itzkoff's review, including Matt Cheney's *The Mumpsimus* ("Dave Itzkoff's Inner Child Is Not Happy," March 5, 2006), which parses Itkoff's implicit assumptions and tone (and which Itzkoff himself alluded to in a later column).

4. Ray Davis's response to Lethem's piece ("Things Are Tough All Over") focuses on another aspect of Lethem's argument, viz., that SF has become less conducive to the production of "Great Books" than it was previously, while, conversely, since the 1970s, the mainstream has become more hospitable to Great Books. Davis notes that Lethem misses the point that Delany has often made, that what Lethem calls "the mainstream" is as much a genre as SF is. In Lethem's essay, Davis argues, "the mainstream" is "that place where all can be judged by their writerly merits rather than (as in SF) by nostalgic prejudices… .I agree with Lethem that the SF genre's markets provide limited freedom for production of Great Books, and that the strictures continue to tighten. I regretfully disagree that an equivalent number of Great Books will appear in mainstream fiction markets as they disappear from a fading SF genre, any more than (to switch media) an equivalent number of Great TV Movies showed up to offset the loss of Great B Pictures."

5. See Michael Swanwick's "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns," which defended John Kessel, James Patrick Kelly, Connie Willis, and others against the attacks of Bruce Sterling's "VincentOmniaveritas."

6. On November 1, 2006, as a writer participating in a reading of work from *ParaSpheres: Extending Beyond the Spheres of Literary and Genre Fiction* at the University of California at San Diego, I found myself included in a discussion of "New Wave Fabulism." During the Q&A following our reading, Anna Joy Springer, who had organized the reading, said that "so much of the work we need" is getting "thrown away into the genres." (The UCSD library owns an audio cassette recording of the event, including the Q&A.) Ken Keegan, the editor

of *ParaSpheres*, writes in an essay at the end of the volume, "There are really at least three different kinds of fiction: genre, literary (in its realistic, character-based sense), and a third type of fiction that really has no commonly accepted name, which does have cultural meaning and artistic value and therefore does not fit well in the escapist formula genres, but which has non-realistic elements and settings that exclude it from the category of literary fiction." (633) After a rather convoluted discussion about various labels, Keegan concludes "By presenting this fiction as neither literary nor genre, but rather as something else, we are avoiding the pitfalls of claiming literary status for these works." (637) And yet: during the Q&A at UCSD, Keegan suggested that "New Wave Fabulist" work "transcends" genre.

7. The scale of "hardness" has purportedly to do with "scientific" accuracy and level of scientific detail, but, as feminist critics point out, is chiefly concerned with whether the author is male, the narrative casts the hero as a can-do, by-his-bootstraps booster of technology, and excludes narratives that challenge naturalized social relations and conventions. Although some fans have tried to argue that only "hard SF" qualifies as SF at all, it is more typical for writers, fans, and critics to see "hard SF" as at the core of the genre and "soft" SF as on the margins. (Not, of course, that many people agree about what is relatively "hard" and what is relatively "soft.") In 1989, for instance, in an inflammatory essay titled "The Rape of Science Fiction," Charles Platt blamed "the so-called New Wave" for initiating the softening (and thus weakening) SF with the result that in the 1970s "a new soft science fiction emerged, largely written by women: Joan Vinge, Vonda McIntyre, Ursula LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Kate Wilhelm, Carol Emshwiller. Their concern for human values was admirable, but they eroded science fiction's one great strength that had distinguished it from all other fantastic literature: its implicit claim that events described *could actually come true.*"(46)

8. According to the head-note in the reprint of the interview in *Silent Interviews,* the text of the interview "began as an interview conducted and recorded by Takayuki Tatsumi at Lunacon, in Croton, New York, in April 1998." Delany then "rewrote the transcription over the next month" and it was published in *Science Fiction Eye* vol. 1, no.3.

9. Since Delany corrected and amplified some of his answers after the interview had been completed, it is impossible to be certain that Delany in fact made the assertion that feminist SF had influenced cyberpunk which Tatsumi then ignored, but Delany's colloquial rejoinder, "Well, again, you're indulging in that same cyberpunk nervousness" suggests that he did. My conversation with Delany immediately following my presentation of an earlier version of this

paper at the Delany Symposium confirmed my impression. Delany remarked that his coming up with the conceit of the illegitimate family relations during the interview was a pleasure to remember, since it was, he said, one of those wonderful, rare instances of *esprit d'escalier*.

10. In his "Forward" to *Microcosmic God,* Delany contrasts the notion (clearly held by Argyll Sturgeon) that the author of works of high (canonical) literature is the "Good Physician" while the author of the pulp genres is a "scamp" to the extent that s/he does not put much effort into writing, or a "criminal" to the extent that s/he does. As long as the SF genre continues to be tagged with the characterization of "garbage" and "trash," it can't very well conceive of itself in terms of legitimate paternal lineages and the Law.

11. Josh Lukin has suggested to me the Telemachian trope of a younger man seeking out and ultimately making his peace with an older mentor over the discredited body of a woman and being inducted into the patriarchy (a trope which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* reveals is ubiquitous in canonical (high) literature), may be what Tatsumi was pursuing in his questions to Delany about lineage. But the Telemachian trope, of course, is by no means ubiquitous in SF as it is in canonical literature.

12. Molly is an important character in Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Unlike most female characters in pre-cyberpunk noir, Molly may be a babe, but her role is to kick ass rather than using her sexual wiles to lure men to their doom. Her current occupation in the novel is security-for-hire. She is not only hard as nails, but has also had retractable claws implanted in place of her fingernails. Besides her retractable claws, Molly also has permanent mirrored shades, which makes her very, very cool. We are told she acquired her expensive special features by working as a "meat puppet"—a prostitute whose consciousness is taken over by a program, leaving her with no memory afterwards of the uses to which her body had been put.

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