Queering SF

Queering SF: Readings

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Dedication
to all my students,
who continue to inspire me
to teach and to learn

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36 Shades of Queer: An Introduction

What is SF? Well, that's the question. The answers are as varied as the people you ask. Their answers have filled volumes, from the practical to the esoteric, from the sublime to the ridiculous. I tend to use self-identification as a rule of thumb. If an author identifies their text as SF (science fiction or speculative fiction), then I accept that. That leads to the question, though, why do *they* consider it SF? In what ways does the piece conform to, or push at the boundaries of, what is generally accepted as SF?

What does SF do? Yes, it imagines new technologies. Yes, it imagines other worlds or societies. But at its very best, it asks questions. It compels the reader to ask questions. It makes the reader see something in a new light. It asks the reader to consider the verities of this world and to wonder if they might be mistaken. Maybe it gets us all to think about the world just a little bit queerly.

So, what is "queer"? Another very large question. At various times, the term means (or has meant) an insult, an identity, a set of practices, or an interpretive framework. For our purposes here, it means the last three of those definitions.

What does queer—and queer theory—have to do with SF? The queer theorist William Haver (he/him) has wondered about this. Haver writes about "queer" as "making strange, queer, or even cruel what we had thought to be a world" (in Golding, 1997, 291). In other words, the queer also asks us to consider the world as we know it just a little bit queerly.

In this sense, SF and queer are asking the reader to do similar things.

In terms of queer SF, the year 2010 seems to have been a watershed year. For whatever set of reasons, the number of queer SF texts exploded. The reasons included the following: changes in society, including the same-sex marriage debates; changes in social media gender/sexuality protocols; debates around "don't ask, don't tell"; coming of age of Gen Xers and Gen Yers; new people in editorial and publishing positions; dramatic shifts in publishing outlets and platforms. In 2020, Lee Mandelo (he/they) convened a virtual roundtable of writers of queer SF to ask about the changes in the past decade. According to these writers, a lot has changed, but it's not enough. The field *has* changed, but it's not where it needs to be.

We can all probably name queer texts that came before: the proto-queer texts, the historical queer texts, the subtle or coded queer texts (read Wendy Gay Pearson's she/her] essay, "Alien Cryptographies" for more on this). But explicit queer SF texts filled with queer characters and queer frameworks perhaps not so much.

Even with the increased number of explicitly queer SF texts, heteronormative privilege dominates SF publishing. One sign of privilege is if an author/text does not carry the entire weight of a marginalized community. For example, a cis-het, white writer can write an awful book, replete with racism, sexism, and homophobia, and that book will not reflect badly on cis-het, white writers. No one will say, "You see. I told you they were bad." No, no one will say, "You see, that reflects badly on the cis-het white community." Or, no one will say, "That just does not reflect the reality of cis-het lives." No, it can stand on its own.

The same cannot be said for queer writers of SF. Every character they write, every world they build, every text they publish will reflect on queer writers, queer communities, and queer SF. (See the discussion below on "I Sexually Identify As an Attack Helicopter.")

Perhaps more important than the sheer number of queer writers of SF is that fact that queer writers of SF continue to shape the *entire* field, sad puppies notwithstanding. Queer writers of SF demand better management and publishing practices; queer writers of SF develop new outlets; queer writers of SF offer texts that live up to the promise of a differently imagined future. What good is shiny new technology and colonies in space if we're stuck in the same old social and political patterns of marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation? What good is genetic modification and disease eradication if only the same groups of people benefit? What good is longevity (even immortality) if the society is a nightmare (see discussion below of Janelle Monáe).

What I hope to do in the following essays is (1) to introduce readers to some of the shades of queer in SF writing. SF is not a monolith. Queer SF is not, either. Writers of queer SF approach it in a variety of ways, with a variety of end goals. I also hope (2) to introduce some writers and texts that readers may not know about. As I noted, the field has opened up, and it is no longer easy to keep up with. In addition, I hope (3) to demonstrate some of the ways in which queer SF pushes at the very generic norms of SF. The idea of SF, the characteristics of SF, the content of SF have all been shaped (a) in a particular place and time, and (b) in your own reading experience. Many of these writers want to challenge what SF looks like and does. And finally, I hope (4) to point to some of these newly imagined futures, to spend some time in differently imagined societies and families, and to think about the ways in which you would like to see that in our own reality.

The genesis of this book lies in teaching. I have taught several courses on Queer SF in the past few years (2019-21). Nothing builds a knowledge base like prepping new courses. I read far and wide in order to put together the syllabi. Further, nothing makes one think through a text like preparing to teach it. As a way of preparing to teach each of the following texts (stories, novels, graphic novels, albums), I would write a draft of an essay, setting out the key issues for discussion of the texts (author bio, historical background, literary connections) and ways in which the texts operate as queer SF. In this sense, the following essays are fleshed-out outlines for teaching the texts.

Finally, the essays that follow are only a beginning. Although the trickle has begun, the real cascade has yet to appear. I can't wait to teach new courses on Queer SF. I can't wait to see what the next ten years of Queer SF brings. As Richard Labonté (he/him) and Lawrence Schimel (he/him) wrote in their 2006 anthology, *The Future Is Queer*.

A note on pronouns: I have tried to the best of my ability to locate the pronouns for people discussed in the book. I have consulted home pages, references pages, publisher pages, and social media to determine what pronouns a person uses. However, I am aware that, sometimes, the internet does not get things correct. I am also aware that pronouns are not fixed and stable and that they change over time. The pronouns used in mid-2021 may be different in late-2021 or 2050. Nevertheless, I believe that it is important to used desired pronouns whenever possible: (a) it acknowledges the individuals themselves, and (b) it is consistent with the aim and message of the book.

A note on spoilers: A number of the following readings will contain spoilers. I have tried to minimize these instances; however, a few spoilers remain. Reader beware.

1. It's My Body, and I'll Try If I Want To...

Take a trip back with father Tiresias
Listen to the old one speak of all he has lived through
"I have crossed between the poles, and for me there is no mystery
Once a man, like the sea I raged
Once a woman, like the Earth I gave…."

—Genesis, "The Cinema Show"

The fascination with sex is old; the fascination with the experience of other sexes is also quite old. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid (he/him) writes of the seer Tiresias. He had been called in to settle a dispute between Zeus and Hera about which sex enjoys the act of sex more. They called on Tiresias to settle this dispute because he had been transformed into a woman years earlier when he separated two mating snakes. So, because Tiresias had lived as both male and female, Zeus and Hera thought he would be ideal to answer the question.

John Varley's (he/him) semi-canonical story, "Options," reimagines the myth of Tiresias for a technological age. The novelette first appeared in 1979 in Terry Carr's (he/him) *Universe 9* collection. Varley himself has led an interesting and itinerant life. According to his own webpage, he fled his homeland of Texas for a college scholarship in Michigan, but he found academia boring. He dropped out, became a hippie, and lived in San Francisco for a while. After a period of years struggling to support himself financially, he decided in 1973 to write science fiction, and he has written ever since. While he is well-known for his Geaen trilogy and his Thunder and Lighting series of

novels, it was "Persistence of Vision" (1978) that put him on the map. Over the course of his career, his work has garnered 9 Locus Awards, 3 Hugo Awards, 2 Nebula Awards, and 1 each of the Analog Award and the Apollo Award.

So, early in his career, and just six years after he started writing, he published "Options."

This updated version of the Tiresias myth is set in an undetermined future in King City on the moon and centers on a single family: Cleopatra, Jules, Lilli, Paul, and Feather. Cleo (she/her) is an architect and Jules (he/him) works in an unnamed business. While both are professionals, much of the domestic and care work falls on Cleo. In other words, gender roles have remained largely intact. And, yet, other social mores have changed. Public nudity seems to be a non-issue, as many of the poorer residents cannot afford the disposable clothing, and their children attend school naked. Open relationships seem to be a norm, as well. Both Jules and Cleo have lovers outside the marriage, typically with the knowledge and consent of their partner.

And, yet, Cleo struggles with three children at breakfast while Jules calmly reads the morning news (on an iPad-like device). After every one has been dealt with, Cleo herself heads to work, taking Feather with her because the baby is still breastfeeding. The commute is long for Cleo, as they had decided to live nearer to Jules's work. As Feather breastfeeds while they commute, Cleo reads the news on her own newsreader, including a story about the rise of "changers"—those who undergo sex confirmation surgery. At this time, science and technology have made sex changes quick and easy. Essentially, they grow a clone of someone's body in a mere six months and then transplant the brain, intact, in a simple procedure. The patient walks out an hour later.

The technology, from the vantage of 2021, seems a bit farfetched. That, I would argue, is not the point. Varley is not

really concerned with whether or not our technology will get there one day—though it just *might*. He's not engaged in technological extrapolation, but rather sociological extrapolation. His real concern here is with examining sex, gender, and sexuality and their relation to the body.

Cleo finds herself just not feeling satisfied. She loves being a woman. She loves being a mother (even if at times she wishes differently). She loves having sex with her husband (even if she sometimes wishes it were not always on his terms). And, yet, something is missing. And so she's intrigued by the notion of changing sexes. Later, Cleo mentions "Changers" to Jules, but he resists. He has no interest in changing, and he hopes she doesn't, either. Jules finds it "a little sick" (195).

One day while on a shopping trip, she stops into a sex-change office. They offer her a virtual model of what she would look like in a male body. Because she has been an athlete, the modeling looks heavier and heftier than she would like. Not to worry, it's all customizable. But Cleo is not ready to make the change. Instead, they offer her a compromise, a more "androgynous look." And, on the spot, they reduce the size of her breasts. When she arrives home, Jules is less than pleased. She counters, "But I don't ask you when I put on lipstick or cut my hair. It's my body" (200). This argument begins to raise the central question about the relationship between body and person, between body and identity.

He, of course, thinks about his own pleasure, but also about Feather. Cleo can no longer breastfeed. She counters that Jules can breastfeed the baby (another new social norm) or bottle feed her. Jules has never been raised thinking of breastfeeding as one of his duties or options, has never seen his body in that role, has never seen himself fulfilling that function. He says it would feel "silly" (202). He opts for bottle feeding. And because he will be feeding her, he begins to take her to work with

him. Cleo reacts negatively, though, because Jules won't take on the mothering/nurturing role "as a female" (210).

The proverbial straw appears the next time Cleo has sex, on her back. Jules has always preferred top position during sex. Cleo has gone along with it, though she, too, would prefer to be on top. This time, she insists, and he resists. For him, he cannot separate it from her interest in changing. He cannot separate it from her questioning of gender and sex roles. For him, it feels like an attempt at reversing the roles, at domination. Frustrated, she leaves.

As the news article had told her, Changers tend to commingle. They prefer one another's company, and they frequent specialized bars. She finds the Oophyte because she's "still curious" (205). (An oophyte is the gametophyte of mosses and ferns; they create gametes via mitosis.) At the bar, the lighted sign has an alternating plus sign and arrow attached to the O. It revolved so that "[o]ne moment the plus sign was inside and the arrow out, the next moment the reverse" (205). While the name of the bar suggests a rupturing of the reproductive imperative of heterosexual futurity, the reality inside the bar doesn't live up to the hype. In the bar, she has sex with Saffron, who has changed sex many times. Saffron tells her that the body into which one is born does not matter, and warns her that changing sexes will not solve any of her problems. Cleo asks Saffron if he had been born female. He responds, "It's no longer important how I was born. I've been both. It's still me on the inside" (207). Saffron suggests then that identity is not bodily but cognitive.

Following her encounter at the Oophyte, Cleo orders the creation of her cloned body. She will have six months to wait until it is fully grown. She informs Jules of her decision; he reminds her that he will not "follow her" in her decision (208). He says that when she walks into the house in a male body, he may not be able to see her in the same way anymore. Cleo

responds, "You could if you were a woman" (208). Here, again, we see the heteronormativity that permeates the story.

Six months later, Cleo wakes up in a male body. Cleo and the text then shift to Leo and to masculine pronouns (he/him). While the children—who have grown up with changing as a social commonplace—hardly notice, Jules is not happy. He brings a woman home for revenge sex, but Leo joins them. They also discover that the revenge lover is also a Changer.

Leo returns to the Oophyte, and he is propositioned by several women. When he cannot "perform" (209) for Lynx, they commiserate. Lynx does not want to hurt Leo's "male ego" (214). Lynx suggests to Leo, "Don't be a man. Be a male human, instead" (215). Jules and Leo become buddies. Leo feels more "whole" than ever before and can see that Jules is "not whole" (219). Eventually, though, Leo and Jules do have sex. What, then, were Jules's reservations? Social mores had changed, and the stigma of same-sex sex seemed to have disappeared. Jules's hang-up seemed to be that, for him, Cleo's identity, and his love for her, resided in her body.

Leo returns to a female body, but does not return to being Cleo. That person is gone. She (her pronouns always follow her body choice) is now some holistic combination of Cleo and Leo, and adopts the moniker Nile. She tells Jules, "What you have to understand is that they're both gone, in a sense" (222).

Several things become apparent after reading the story. For one, it operates from a particular binary perspective on identities. For another, it assumes a particular relationship between the body and identity.

On the one hand, I would commend Varley for taking on the issue. Far too much SF has simply assumed traditional gender roles, even in radically altered futures. As Veronica Hollinger writes in "(Re)Reading Queerly," science fiction has traditionally been an "overwhelmingly *straight*" narrative form (24). True, many New Wave and feminist science fiction

writers had already addressed gender roles and sex roles by 1979. Still, Varley addresses the issues of body and identity, and body and sexuality squarely and centrally.

Varley may have also been aware of the emergence of Queer Studies in the 1970s. The first undergraduate course on the topic of homosexuality was offered at UC Berkeley in the spring of 1970 (MacNaron, 168), and Varley was living in San Francisco around that time. Regardless, the story, in some ways, parallels the real-life story of Christine Jorgensen, the first known US citizen to undergo gender confirmation surgery (GCS). (I am not suggesting that Varley consciously or unconsciously took Jorgensen as a model, only noting the similarities.) Jorgensen returned from a stint in the Army and attended college and read an article about GCS. Jorgensen then traveled to Denmark for the initial surgeries, and completed them in the United States. Her transition was front-page news in New York in the early 1950s, and she was hailed as having paved the way for trans individuals who followed. In 1951, Jorgensen wrote in a letter to friends:

> As you can see by the enclosed photos, taken just before the operation, I have changed a great deal. But it is the other changes that are so much more important. Remember the shy, miserable person who left America? Well, that person is no more and, as you can see, I'm in marvelous spirits.
> (Jorgensen, 1967, 105)

The sentiments here echo the discussions between Cleo and Saffron. For Jorgensen, she was dissatisfied with her body, and the change in bodies was integral to her sense of self and her self-satisfaction. While the change is not quite as clear-cut for Cleo, Cleo does experience dissatisfaction, and Nile does feel more whole (and arguably more satisfied) after having experienced life (and sex) in female and male bodies—the

modern-day Tiresias. Nile tells Jules that both Cleo and Leo are gone, just as Christine says that the person who left the United States is gone.

And yet "Options" seems to miss the mark in a number of other areas. For one, the story assumes a binary identity. Both before and after surgery, Changers seem to have only two options: female bodies or male bodies. True, they can customize the degree of femininity or masculinity and can sculpt the body to fit a personal self-image. Even so, the options remain binary. That binary is reinforced when Cleo wants Jules to "follow" her into changing. Although they both seem to have little hesitation with taking lovers of either sex, Cleo seems to believe that they should both change in order to maintain the heterosexual dyad. She also seems irritated that Jules will excel at "mothering" while in a male body. For Cleo, cis-het remains the normative standard.

The Oophyte sign, while on the one hand a symbol rupturing the sexual reproductive order, at the same time reinforces the binary options of male and female. At Oophyte, Cleo initially has sex with Saffron, who identifies as a man (though has changed many times). Her initial impulse is to maintain the heteronormative relationship, even while in a place situated outside the norms of society. After the change, Leo returns to Oophyte and is propositioned by three women. So, even as Leo pursues a heterosexual relationship, the three women from Oophyte do as well.

The other area that seems to miss the mark is complexity of the relationship between self and body. During Cleo's first trip to Oophyte, Saffron says the body does not matter, that it's the same person inside. During the second trip to the bar, Lynx tells Leo that she does not want to hurt Leo's "male ego." Clearly the social function and value of the body has changed in Varley's future world. Children casually go off to school in the nude. The only shame is of class, not body or sexuality. And

yet, Cleo makes it clear that living inside her body, having sex as a woman, giving birth to children, breastfeeding them, playing sports have *all* had an effect on her identity and her sense of self. So, does the body "not matter?" Leo's male ego isn't damaged because Leo has not lived the life with the expectations of masculinity. Cleo makes that clear in her relationship with Jules.

Part of the difficulty that "Options" faces, then, is the way in which it assumes gender and sexuality as an essentialized identity. Of course, it's not fair to judge "Options" according to theoretical understandings of 2021. At the time Varley published "Options," feminist theorists were already rejecting gender as an essential identity in favor of a discursive construct in the 1970s. For example, in 1979—the same year Varley published "Options"—Esther Newton published *Mother Camp*, a study of drag queens in which Newton makes the claim that drag ruptures the connection between sexed body and gendered behavior. Newton's study was groundwork for the full-fledged arguments of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), which argues that gender is a performance of a social norm.

So, "Options" appears at a moment of theoretical and conceptual change. While the story offers a view of sex, gender, and sexuality that might seem outmoded in 2021, it remains an insight into the history of our conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. It takes identity as an essence. The person exists regardless of, and in spite of, the body. And, yet, the experiences one has in a different body matter, and they do affect the person's wholeness. The characters in "Options" *do* have some options, though they are limited by the operational model of sex, gender, and sexuality as binaries. As long as we're offered a static set of choices (for birth certificates, driver's licenses, passports), we will be limited in our options. What queer theory and performance theory offer is the notion of sex and gender as a set of practices that we engage in, that

shape us as we engage in them, but do not adhere as essential elements of the self.

And in that model, we have options.